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Gender equality in global climate governance

Why incentives, finance, and institutions matter

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Key takeaways

Gender equality is now formally embedded in global climate governance. Yet in practice, climate policy reflects a divided agenda. Developed countries tend to perform better on gender-balanced participation in climate negotiations, while developing countries more consistently integrate gender into their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

This divide is driven by differences in incentives, financing structures, and how countries use their NDCs. For many developing countries, integrating gender into climate policy is closely tied to accessing international climate finance and demonstrating alignment with donor expectations. For developed countries, gender equality is often addressed through domestic policy frameworks but is less visible in international climate commitments.

The result is a fragmented approach in which participation and policy evolve separately, limiting the effectiveness of gender-responsive climate action and reducing opportunities for shared learning across countries.

Over the past decade, gender equality has become a recognised component of the UN climate regime. Key frameworks such as the Lima Work Programme on Gender and the Gender Action Plan established two core objectives: improving women's participation in climate decision-making and promoting gender-responsive climate policy.

However, progress across these two areas has been uneven. While participation has improved incrementally, policy integration remains inconsistent and often limited in scope. In many cases, gender is still treated as an add-on rather than a cross-cutting dimension of climate policy. More importantly, the two pillars have developed independently rather than in tandem.

This has produced a central policy problem: Greater representation has not translated into more gender-responsive climate policy.

At the same time, a second divide has emerged. Developed countries tend to perform better on participation, while developing countries more frequently include gender considerations in NDCs. This reflects not only differences in institutional capacity, but also differences in incentives and the role that NDCs play in different national contexts.

Together, these trends point to a divided agenda in global climate governance, shaped by differences in incentives, finance, and institutional practices.

A divided agenda in practice

1. The gap between participation and policy

Efforts to improve gender balance in climate negotiations have delivered gradual but still modest progress. Monitoring systems and reporting requirements have increased attention to representation, and more women now participate in national delegations and UN climate processes. However, as of 2023, only around 16% of national delegations achieved parity. Women's participation has increased, but remains uneven across countries, regions, and roles, indicating that the UN climate process is still a long way from achieving gender equity in participation.

At the same time, this progress in participation does not align with patterns of gender integration in climate policy.

Evidence from NDCs shows little relationship between the share of women in delegations and the extent to which countries integrate gender into their climate commitments. Countries with relatively high levels of female participation do not necessarily adopt more gender-responsive policies, indicating that participation is not a reliable indicator of broader commitment to gender equality in climate governance.

While improvements in representation are important in their own right, they do not necessarily reflect broader commitment to gender-responsive climate policy. As a result, participation and policy have evolved along separate tracks, limiting the extent to which progress in one area is reflected in the other.

2. The North–South divide in gender-responsive policy

A second divide is visible between developed and developing countries.

Developed countries generally perform better on gender-balanced participation in climate negotiations. However, this does not necessarily translate into greater attention to gender in climate policy. References to gender in their NDCs are often limited, particularly in mitigation-focused areas, and do not necessarily capture gender-related measures that may exist in domestic policy frameworks.

In contrast, developing countries more frequently integrate gender into their NDCs. Their climate commitments are more likely to include:

- Gender-sensitive planning frameworks
- Institutional mechanisms for gender inclusion
- Commitments to implementation and capacity-building.

This pattern reflects differences in incentives rather than differences in awareness or political commitment. It also reflects the broader role that NDCs play in different national contexts, particularly in relation to international support and implementation needs.

What drives the divide?

1. Climate finance as a key incentive

The most important driver of gender-responsive policy in developing countries is access to international climate finance.

Major funding mechanisms—including the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF)—require gender considerations in project design and implementation. As a result, countries seeking financial support have strong incentives to integrate gender into their climate strategies and planning documents.

In practice, this means that gender responsiveness is often embedded in NDCs as part of a broader effort to demonstrate credibility to international partners and funders. This dynamic helps explain why gender is more visible in policy documents, even when implementation remains uneven.

2. Different functions of NDCs

Countries also use NDCs differently.

• Developed countries tend to treat NDCs primarily as technical compliance documents, focused on emissions targets and reporting requirements

• Developing countries often treat NDCs as both policy frameworks and investment strategies, designed to attract external support

This difference helps explain why gender is more visible in developing country NDCs. Including gender signals alignment with international priorities, strengthens funding proposals, and demonstrates readiness for implementation.

3. Uneven institutional integration

Gender is not consistently integrated across climate policy frameworks. While some countries have developed institutional mechanisms to mainstream gender, these are often shaped by external support and evolve unevenly across sectors.

As a result, gender considerations are more visible in areas such as adaptation and NDC preparation than in mitigation, especially in energy, industry, and transport policy. This uneven integration limits the extent to which gender is embedded across the full scope of climate action.

4. External influence and capacity building

External actors—including international organisations and donors—play a significant role in shaping climate policy in developing countries. Capacity-building programmes and technical support often promote gender integration as part of broader climate planning processes, particularly in the preparation of NDCs and related policy frameworks.

While this has helped mainstream gender in some contexts, it can also lead to standardised approaches that prioritise alignment with external requirements. As a result, gender integration is often shaped by the expectations and criteria associated with international support, which can contribute to uneven and partial incorporation across policy areas and limit its integration beyond specific planning processes.

Policy implications

The current trajectory risks reinforcing a divided approach to gender equality in global climate governance.

On the one hand, participation-focused approaches in developed countries increase the visibility of gender equality in representation, but are not consistently reflected in climate policy. On the other hand, gender integration in developing country NDCs is often more visible, but is shaped by external incentives and does not always translate into sustained institutional change.

This fragmented approach has three key consequences:

1. Limited policy impact

Gender remains unevenly integrated across climate policy and is often peripheral to core mitigation strategies, particularly in energy, industry, and transport.

2. Inconsistent alignment between commitments and implementation

Gender provisions included in NDCs are not always reflected in domestic policies, budgets, or institutional arrangements, particularly where integration is driven by external requirements.

3. Partial and uneven engagement with gender

Gender considerations remain concentrated in specific policy areas—such as adaptation and planning—rather than systematically embedded across climate governance, limiting attention to the broader social and power dimensions of climate change.

Taken together, these dynamics reinforce a divided agenda in which participation and policy evolve along separate tracks, and where visible progress in one area does not necessarily reflect broader engagement with gender-responsive climate action.

Policy recommendations

1. Strengthen gender-equitable participation in climate governance: Increase women's representation in delegations, particularly in senior and decision-making roles, and strengthen domestic pathways to leadership.

2. Strengthen the integration of gender in mitigation policy: Move beyond a narrow focus on adaptation and vulnerability by incorporating gender more systematically into mitigation—particularly in energy, industry, and transport.

3. Link NDC commitments to domestic implementation: Ensure that gender provisions in NDCs are reflected in national policies, budgets, and institutional arrangements.

4. Align climate finance with long-term gender integration: Expand support for gender-responsive implementation while ensuring that financing mechanisms strengthen institutional integration rather than short-term compliance.

5. Enhance inclusive policymaking: Involve civil society, women's organisations, and local stakeholders early in policy design to ensure that gender considerations reflect local priorities and lived experiences.

6. Reflect gender-responsive policies in NDCs: Use NDCs to showcase existing national approaches to gender integration and share best practices across countries.

Conclusion

Gender equality is now embedded in the architecture of global climate governance, but its implementation remains uneven and fragmented.

The evidence points to a divided agenda, shaped by differences in incentives, finance, and institutional practices. Participation and policy have evolved along separate tracks.

Closing this gap requires moving beyond symbolic commitments towards more integrated, better resourced, and more institutionally embedded approaches to gender-responsive climate policy.

Without such changes, gender will remain an add-on rather than a core component of effective and just climate action.

Further reading

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• Hathaway, E. 2025. Does gender matter for climate change governance? A review of empirical research. French Politics 23: 267–286.

• This Policy Brief is based on: Dominguez Britos, A. V. and Stevenson, H. (2026) 'Who cares about gender? A comparison of parties' commitment to gender equality in the UN climate regime', *Environmental Politics*, pp. 1–23.

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