



A Call for Reforms from Climate Action to Women's Leadership

**## OVERDUE
4EQUITY**
Supporting Women's Leadership

 **The
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Georgetown Institute for
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Supporting Women's Leadership Amidst Pushback

Democracy is under attack globally, with serious implications for gender equity. From Turkey to Poland, Iran to Myanmar, Afghanistan to Egypt, and most recently, Ukraine, women are on the frontlines defending against a simultaneous assault on women's rights and democratic values.

Women's political participation and power **threatens** authoritarian governments, who view women's leadership as tilting a zero-sum game of power politics. To reinforce gender hierarchies and thwart democratic progress, concerted efforts are underway to rollback women's rights – including slashing funding for women's programs, contesting sexual and reproductive rights, and **reversing** commitments to prevent domestic violence under the Istanbul Convention and national laws. Opposition to gender equity and women's rights activism has become more **vocal, global, and organized** with the emergence of extreme and conservative actors, right-wing populist and nationalist groups, and men's rights groups that are coming together. At the same time, civic space is **shrinking**, leading to constraints on women-led organizations that are essential to transparent and responsive governance. Covid-19 has **accelerated** these trends by giving authoritarian leaders a mechanism to restrict democratic freedom in the name of addressing the pandemic.

Women in politics also face an increasingly **hostile** environment. Targeted attacks against women leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders are widespread, and proliferate through unchecked and unregulated abuse on social media. Coordinated campaigns of disinformation perpetuate cycles of gender inequality and women's political exclusion, including by discouraging women from running for office, pushing them out of politics, or leading them to self-censor and disengage from political discourse. Few country-level initiatives exist to prevent gendered political violence, and women lack support networks to navigate and confront these barriers. Getting elected is only half the battle.

Once an insidious trend, **backlash** is now overt and rapidly intensifying. The Taliban is imposing radical restrictions on Afghan women, and conflict-related sexual violence abounds in Ukraine, Myanmar, and beyond. The rollback of reproductive rights in the United States and elsewhere undermines the very foundation of gender equity.

In response, women are defending their rights and democratic values, often at great risk. They are organizing mass protests, spearheading social media campaigns, and working within institutions and with allies to prevent rollback of women's gains. In using their power for purpose, expanding civic space, and exercising their vote, women are proving they are a force that will defend both gender equity and democracy itself.

Recommendations

Fostering Conditions For Women Political Leaders to Succeed

- ▶ **There is a need for establishing support networks for women political leaders and heads of state through high-level training programs and mentorship.** These networks should focus on building resilience among both established and emerging leaders and equipping them with strategies for navigating pushback.
- ▶ **Women leaders should use their platforms to elevate other women leaders' successes and call out attacks.** Public and private actors can organize global campaigns to amplify impact and expose smear campaigns.

Addressing Online Violence Against Women

- ▶ **Policymakers should ensure international standards and legal frameworks address all forms of violence against women,** including by listing hate speech as a cyber-crime and form of gender-based violence.
- ▶ **The United Nations (UN) should create a new code of conduct on women's rights and online abuse to hold powerful actors like social media and big tech companies to account.** Based on the UN Standards of Conduct for Business model, the UN should partner with NGOs to develop mechanisms to ensure accountability.
- ▶ **Global convenings, like the 2023 U.S. Summit for Democracy, should prioritize commitments** that establish new internet and social media standards with women leaders, activists, and private sector actors.

Rallying Collective Action To Challenge Pushback

- ▶ **Diverse women's movements, including women of color and indigenous women, should work to coordinate their messaging** to challenge organized opposition forces.
- ▶ **Governments and private actors should mobilize support and financial resources for women-led actions and online social media campaigns,** such as the #MeToo Movement and activists under arrest. Support should be paired with resources such as rapid response for activists and human rights defenders and spotlighting situations of violence or abuse.

Strengthening Implementation, Monitoring, and Accountability of Commitments

- ▶ **Governments should implement and enforce existing gender equity reforms at global and national levels,** including the Istanbul Convention, CEDAW, WPS Agenda, electoral quotas, and gender mainstreaming efforts. States should integrate gender equity into their broader democracy agendas, as well as foreign policy, development, and security assistance, backed by adequate resources, and ensure reforms reach the local level.
- ▶ **Governments and multilaterals should strengthen monitoring and reporting mechanisms, as well as trainings for law enforcement,** to address rollbacks in women's rights and threats against civil society, women rights defenders, and feminist activists. In line with the UN Special Rapporteur's recommendation, governments should train observers to monitor and report attacks against female candidates and submit findings to treaty-monitoring bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Committee.

Inclusive Climate Action

Climate change – the existential threat of our time – is a **risk multiplier** that threatens international peace and security for all. From crisis-stricken Afghanistan to the drought-affected Sahel, climate change is creating hostile conditions that wreak havoc on agricultural production and access to natural resources, resulting in loss of livelihoods, poverty, instability, and violent conflict.

It is well established that climate change disproportionately affects women, girls, and marginalized communities. Gender norms perpetuate women's unequal access to social and material resources, land ownership, and decision-making power, leaving women **vulnerable to climate impacts** with fewer tools at their disposal for adaptation. In fragile and conflict-affected areas where climate change exacerbates food and water scarcity, women face adverse health effects and increased risks of gender-based violence. Environmental degradation and competition over natural resources often leads to **climate migration** and forced displacement, with heightened risks for those most vulnerable.

At the same time, women are uniquely positioned to contribute to climate solutions. Gendered divisions of labor mean that women are already on the frontlines of resource management in their communities. From mini-electric grids to regenerative agriculture, women's meaningful participation in local-level adaptation can translate into greater economic empowerment and decision-making power, and contribute to more climate-resilient communities. However, the cross-cutting exclusion of women hinders their contribution to an inclusive climate transition. Women are underrepresented in climate decision-making roles, lack opportunities in climate-smart agriculture, and face systematic barriers to accessing technologies, information, and capital.

At the multilateral level, few international frameworks address the gender-climate nexus, and work remains siloed across climate, gender, and security spheres. Only some Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) reference the disproportionate impact of climate change on women and even fewer National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) reference the environment.

Further, climate financing mechanisms are not gender-responsive and do not reach the local level. Only 0.01% of **funding worldwide** supports projects that address both climate and women's rights, and the more fragile a country is, the **less climate finance** it receives. The financing opportunities that exist often involve complex grant applications and reporting requirements that are hardly accessible for women-led organizations. Large-scale financing projects led by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and distributed to large national and international institutions fail to reach local level actors who lead climate mitigation and adaptation solutions.

While the linkages between gender, climate, and security are more salient than ever, there is a long way to go to advance inclusive climate action and ensure women are centered in the just transition.

Recommendations

Catalyzing Private Sector Action for Inclusive Climate Financing

- ▶ **Governments, businesses, foundations, and civil society should establish a climate financing regime that increases access to capital for women's organizations** working in climate adaptation and resilience (including sustainable models in energy farming, solar fields, clean cookstoves, and mini grids). **Corporate carbon offsets** can be targeted to women-led organizations and local climate leaders, and support developing countries in their clean energy transition.
- ▶ **Private actors, through creative communication campaigns, should mobilize shareholders to hold businesses accountable for environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments.** Efforts should present both the moral and business case for inclusive climate action.
- ▶ **Governments should build private sector commitments into Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs),** which offer a roadmap for businesses looking for profitable investments in climate-smart infrastructure. In addition to harnessing capital, it is essential to simplify the application process for the [Green Climate Fund](#) to increase accessibility.

Promoting Women's Leadership in All Levels of Climate Action

- ▶ **Governments should ensure gender parity in all levels of climate change decision making,** including COP delegations and high-level negotiations.
- ▶ **Policymakers should engage women in the design, delivery, and assessment of inclusive climate interventions,** particularly in renewable energy, land ownership and tenure, and sustainable natural resource management. This includes partnering with local women-led initiatives to identify needs and

provide access to technology, trainings, and support networks.

Harnessing New Partnerships and Coalitions

- ▶ **Climate governance should include multi-level and cross-sectoral partnerships.** Initiatives led by cities, provinces, and civil society, such as the [C40 initiative](#), can complement national government efforts and accelerate clean energy outcomes at national and regional levels.
- ▶ **Climate action and women's movements should join forces** to create a more intensive, organized, and broader constituency demanding action on climate change. Efforts should include women, youth, and indigenous peoples.
- ▶ **The climate movement should also broaden its stakeholders to include the health sector, in order to demonstrate the broad and serious consequences of climate change** and influence buy-in on individual and community levels. The narrative should emphasize that the climate crisis is both a public health and national security crisis to catalyze urgent action.

Integrating Gender Across Climate Policy Frameworks

- ▶ **Policymakers should integrate climate-related security risks into Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans and gender into National Action Plans for Climate Change.**
- ▶ **The UNFCCC, in partnership with governments and civil society, should prioritize the collection of sex-disaggregated data and higher quality data** in climate change-affected communities, including intersectional analyses and documentation of best practices and scalable solutions.

Responsive and Inclusive Frameworks for Gender Equity

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action became the essential blueprint for advancing women's rights. Since 1995 there have been important gains for women and girls – parity in education in many countries, fewer deaths in childbirth, more women elected to parliament and in leadership, and reduced discrimination under the law. However, major gaps persist and, in many places, progress has stalled and reversed.

Several efforts have endeavored to strengthen the global gender equity **architecture**. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and **2030 Agenda; United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325** (UNSCR 1325) and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda; and The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (The Istanbul Convention) marked significant strides in safeguarding and advancing women's rights. Most recently, **Generation Equality Forum** – a year-long global consultative process led by UN Women – signaled renewed commitment across states, civil society, and the private sector to advancing global gender equity and ensure it is backed by political and financial commitments.

However, international policies and frameworks have largely failed to deliver for women and girls. Multilateral statements and targets have not been matched with sustained government action and political will. The crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine expose lagging implementation of the WPS agenda, and two decades after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, women remain **excluded** from decision-making and peace tables worldwide. Across conflict and crisis zones globally, gender equity considerations are siloed in national policies and relegated to the margins of core security, economic, and humanitarian decision-making processes. Gender mainstreaming efforts, while important, are limited by insufficient knowledge across staff and lack of training, and responsibilities are too often relegated to a siloed gender focal point instead of organizational leadership.

Insufficient implementation and accountability mechanisms, including for the over \$40 billion in pledges at the Generation Equality Forum, further prevent commitments from being fully realized and reaching local level actors. Funding often fails to reach women-led grassroots organizations due to a lack of flexibility, and many local groups do not have the capacity to accommodate complicated grant applications or onerous reporting requirements.

Activists and national leaders have also been met with **growing pushback** to gender equity as authoritarian regimes and others appeal to “traditional values” and condemn what they have labeled “gender ideology.” Conservative NGOs and State opposition forces are strategically weakening references to gender equity in the UN Human Rights Council, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and the UN Security Council, undermining effective action in multilateral fora. At a time where it is most needed, a weakened multilateral system is all too often failing women and girls.

Recommendations

Making Multilateral Processes Responsive and Inclusive

- ▶ **Member States should promote local efforts to implement UNSCR 1325 and related international frameworks**, and ensure that women inform and shape the programs and monitor progress. Policymakers should engage local women's organizations to analyze WPS frameworks and National Action Plans (NAPs) to make them relevant to current conflict dynamics and address changing realities for their communities.
- ▶ **The UN should institutionalize the participation of civil society, NGOs, and the private sector in all processes**, including by providing opportunities for official representation to women's civil society groups on UN platforms.
- ▶ **The UN should connect top-down multilateral processes with women leaders and human rights defenders on the frontlines of crises** to communicate urgent priorities and identify areas for intervention.

Systematizing Gender-Responsive Conflict and Crises Responses

- ▶ **Governments and multilaterals should ensure women's meaningful participation in peace processes and negotiations at all levels** and facilitate full engagement in national and local policy processes. Particular attention should be given to the implementation of peace agreements.
- ▶ **Governments and international organizations should center women in the design and execution of humanitarian aid and recovery efforts.** Women are essential to effective aid delivery and should be both leaders and beneficiaries of crisis response.
- ▶ **The UN, in partnership with INGOs and civil society, should develop standardized resources**



and trainings for gender-responsive humanitarian action that are applied across all conflict situations. Instead of re-inventing the wheel for each new crisis, governments need systematized, easily accessible guidance for how to address a humanitarian response that ensures both the protection and participation of women.

Securing Accessible Funding for Local Women's Organizations

- ▶ **Governments, multilateral organizations, and international donors should reduce barriers for small, grassroots women's organizations to access flexible funding**, including by ensuring the new funding commitments from the Generation Equality Forum reach local women's groups.
- ▶ **International institutions, such as the World Bank, IMF, OECD, UN Women, and others should leverage their resources and technical expertise** to collect sex-disaggregated data, monitor funding allocation, and ensure it is gender responsive.
- ▶ **The UN should establish a fund to ensure that civil society and women's organizations have resources** to participate in global policy convenings, build networks, and share expertise that is critical for effective outcomes.

Ensuring Implementation and Accountability

- ▶ **The UN should use, strengthen, and coordinate global accountability mechanisms to end impunity, especially for sexual violence in conflict.**

This should include strengthening existing policy frameworks that are legally binding upon state parties; ensuring implementation of UNSCR 1325; expanding the jurisdiction of the ICC; and spotlighting successful country-level initiatives, such as hybrid courts and well-resourced fact-finding missions.

- ▶ **Governments should draft and review national gender action plans and implementation strategies at regular intervals with specific, measurable, and time-bound commitments.** This includes meaningfully engaging local actors and civil society groups in the design of implementation strategies and metrics for success.
- ▶ **Governments should adopt a whole-of-government approach** to advancing gender equity by integrating commitments across agencies.
- ▶ **The UN, in partnership with civil society, should work to ensure implementation of gender provisions in WPS resolutions, peace agreements, and negotiations**, especially where country-level efforts, like National Action Plans (NAPs), have fallen short.

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