

We Can't Fight Climate Change Without Fighting for Gender Equity

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Illustration: Lars Leetaru

Summary. Gender equity and environmental sustainability may seem like unrelated issues, but research shows that they are in fact closely intertwined. Women and other underserved groups are disproportionately impacted by the global climate crisis, but they are also uniquely... [more](#)

As the climate crisis becomes increasingly urgent, organizations around the world have begun investing in a wide array of environmental sustainability initiatives. Some of these efforts target technological solutions, while others prioritize behavioral or economic changes, but what the vast majority have in common is a single-minded focus on reducing carbon emissions. And to be

sure, this is an important goal — but a growing body of research suggests that real progress on environmental sustainability requires solutions that also incorporate social sustainability, and in particular, gender equity.

What does gender have to do with environmental sustainability? These two issues may seem unrelated, but they are in fact closely intertwined. Indeed, a comprehensive report from United Nations (UN) Women found that women are disproportionately impacted by most if not all of the challenges highlighted in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, natural disasters (which have become more common due to the climate crisis) often disproportionately affect women, children, the poor, the elderly, and the disabled, whose perspectives often go unheard or ignored. Women and girls in many regions in the Global South are typically responsible for collecting water, which becomes a lot more taxing during droughts, and in Europe, women are more likely than men to live in flood zones, where the impact of climate change is felt most severely. Studies have also shown that gender-based violence, including physical, psychological, and reproductive violence against women, becomes more prevalent after natural disasters, with complex and far-reaching consequences on health and well-being.

In addition, many policies and initiatives designed to address environmental issues do so while ignoring or even actively harming women and other underserved groups. For example, women and poorer households tend to be affected more negatively by environmental policies such as expansions of public transport, carbon pricing, and taxes, because these policies often overlook the needs of women and underserved groups (e.g., by optimizing public transit for traditional 9-to-5 commutes rather than school pickup routes, or by increasing the prices of goods on which women and families rely). Similarly, in one case, climate-driven efforts to install “clean” cooking stoves were discontinued when organizers realized their impact on emissions was smaller than initially expected, disregarding the unexpected positive byproduct that these stoves improved women's and children's health and safety.

This “carbon tunnel vision” causes well-meaning leaders to overlook the broader sustainability conversation, ultimately limiting their ability to achieve environmental *or* social sustainability goals. Moreover, even when organizations do consider social issues alongside environmental ones, the two topics are often isolated from one another. Despite their clear connections, companies often set separate goals for each sustainability dimension, leading many top executives and board directors to agree that not enough is being done to link social sustainability and diversity with climate goals.

The good news is, while women are especially vulnerable in this climate crisis, they are also uniquely positioned to act as powerful agents of change. On average, women have smaller carbon footprints than men, more-responsible attitudes towards climate change, and greater interest in protecting the environment, with notable examples including activist Greta Thunberg, primatologist Jane Goodall, and consumer advocate Erin Brockovich. Female leaders are already tackling the climate crisis from the grassroots up to the top levels of the corporate world, with studies showing that organizations with more female executives and board members have better performance in terms of both environmental impact and broad corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals. Indeed, research has identified a distinct female leadership advantage: Women have been demonstrated to be more effective leaders both in normal times and during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic (in the U.S. and across 91 countries), and the data suggests this advantage extends to the climate crisis as well.

So how can organizations empower more women to lead the way in fighting the climate crisis? Through both our own extensive research into intersectional sustainability and a comprehensive review of the literature in these fields, we’ve identified six recommendations for leaders:

1. Promote women’s representation in climate policy and decision-making.

Women are currently underrepresented in politics and strategic decision-making generally, as well as in climate politics more specifically. To close this gap, leaders should explicitly support the inclusion of women in political spaces, including by nominating, sponsoring, and of course, voting for female candidates. At the same time, it's also important to avoid relegating women exclusively to special, "women's" spaces. For example, well-intentioned initiatives such as the UN climate conference COP26's dedicated day for gender issues and Women in Finance Climate Action Group can end up reducing women's representation in the mainstream political arena. This is because they can both push women and "women's topics" into these special spaces (and thus out of mainstream spaces) and bias people to believe women only belong in these separate, less valued spaces.

To avoid falling into this trap, leaders can take active steps such as declining to participate in events where men are over-represented (e.g., all-male panels, or "manels," and male-majority conferences, or "manferences"). Conversely, if you're organizing an event and having trouble finding female speakers, consider extending your shortlist to force yourself to look beyond the traditional candidates, as evidence has shown that this simple strategy can boost women's representation and participation in critical decision-making arenas.

2. Craft narratives that inspire girls and women to pursue STEM careers.

Today, women make up just 27% of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce. There are a variety of systemic barriers that contribute to this disparity, but leaders can help bring more women into vital fields related to climate science and engineering by rethinking how they talk about these roles — and who they imply belongs in them — across their internal and external communications.

For example, when crafting job descriptions for technical positions, organizations can remove language that assumes these roles require masculine-coded traits such as brilliance, replace

stereotypically masculine words such as “competitive” and “dominant” with more gender neutral terms, and emphasize how these positions will be an opportunity to improve society and help others, as research has shown that communal goals tend to resonate more with women. In addition, assessing applicants based on job-relevant education and experience rather than penalizing them for unrelated factors such as career breaks can lessen bias against women returning to the workforce after maternity or caregiving leaves.

Beyond addressing bias in hiring, leaders can also challenge pervasive masculinity ideals by spotlighting female role models. In particular, studies have shown that role models who exemplify both femininity and success can be highly effective for drawing women to STEM fields.

3. Narrow the gender data gap.

Without data on the intersection of social and environmental sustainability, it’s difficult to determine how climate change may affect various groups, let alone develop evidence-backed solutions to address these issues. Today, a persistent gender data gap limits many organizations’ ability to disaggregate data by gender and other demographic groups, making it impossible to identify and work on these interconnected challenges.

To make real progress on sustainability, organizations need to collect better data while protecting individual privacy. Among other things, that means making sure to include data on gender even in areas that might seem gender neutral, such as when analyzing the impact of policies that mandate long work hours, because deeply embedded gender norms and structures can contribute to gender inequalities in ways that can be hard to predict or detect. It’s also important to ensure that women who drop out of the workforce are accounted for, whether through exit interviews or other data sources, both to identify and address the root causes driving women’s turnover and to enable leaders to make decisions that are informed as much by the women who leave as those who stay. And of course, in addition to making these changes themselves, organizations should encourage their

suppliers and partners to collect and report gender-disaggregated data as well, as research has shown that even companies that have made great strides in meeting social sustainability goals often (knowingly or unknowingly) work with suppliers who flagrantly violate those same standards.

4. Report on your performance for E, S, G...and their intersections.

ESG stands for Environmental, Social, and Governance — and yet when it comes to measuring and reporting on ESG performance, many companies struggle to move beyond the “E.” Executives often focus exclusively on metrics related to carbon emissions, with little attention paid to other critical components of social sustainability and governance. And when they do report on social elements of ESG, it’s often with superficial metrics such as diversity head counts, which hardly capture nuanced insight into questions such as employee’s experiences of inclusion, growth opportunities, etc.

To address this gap, executives can start by considering metrics such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards — a practical tool to help companies increase ESG transparency by embedding SDGs into corporate reporting. They can also get creative and identify other social ESG metrics that may be relevant to their businesses, such as the UN’s Human Rights Due Diligence assessment. In addition, it’s important for leaders to stay up to date as new standards are developed, and likewise, for organizations such as the International Sustainability Standards Board to continue to improve on the guidelines they offer, ensuring that companies are empowered to report not only on a wide variety of sustainability metrics, but also on their intersections.

5. Normalize men caring about climate.

In many cultures, people are socialized from early childhood to view caring about environmental issues as feminine. But asking women to exclusively carry the burden of protecting our environment undermines progress on both the environmental and social sustainability fronts. It’s long past time for leaders to

proactively challenge prevailing social norms around masculinity and encourage men to work alongside women to address these critical issues that affect us all.

One way to do this is to encourage men to focus on another aspect of their identity. For example, research suggests that men with daughters may be more motivated to fight for social sustainability and climate justice. Similarly, Swedish non-profit MÄN has developed a conversation guide to help male leaders acknowledge and redefine masculinity norms within their organizations, giving them the tools to become more active participants in driving equality and sustainability solutions.

6. Self-educate.

Ignorance is no excuse for inaction. It's up to leaders to continuously identify and fill the gaps in their own knowledge. As a starting point, leaders should be aware of basic facts and figures related to gender equality and climate change, consider taking individual-level action, and follow climate influencers and verified scientific sources on social media. They can also consider joining initiatives focused on addressing sustainability issues, many of which are actively growing and seeking collaboration partners. For example, the World Business Council for Sustainability Development is a CEO-led community of business leaders focused on sustainability, while organizations such as Transparentem and CHTCS offer resources that help organizations assess and reduce unsustainable practices across their supply chains, including those related to both environmental and social impact.

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Of course, gender is just one social category. A truly intersectional approach to sustainability must consider not just gender, but also factors such as age, race, location, socioeconomic status, and more. It must also acknowledge the limitations of all these categories — for example, analyses that treat gender as a binary (including many of those cited in this article), while useful in some contexts, are also inherently flawed in their exclusion of

individuals who don't fall into the traditional categories of "women" and "men." To tackle climate change (as well as the myriad other sustainability challenges that face today's organizations), leaders must acknowledge the complexity and interconnectedness of these issues — and work to develop integrated solutions that will improve them all.

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