



RESEARCH
PAPER
ZONTA
SAYS NOW
2024-2026

WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DECISION-MAKING

FOREWORD



Zonta International calls on its membership to:

Support the inclusion of women at the national and local tables of decision-makers on environmental sustainability.

Zonta International Statement on Climate Change, 2021

The world is changing fast—and not always for the better. Across every continent, we are witnessing record-breaking temperatures, devastating wildfires, floods, droughts, and the displacement of millions due to environmental disasters. As scientists have warned for decades, the climate crisis is accelerating—and those with the fewest resources are being hit the hardest.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected, not because they are inherently more vulnerable, but because they are too often excluded from the decisions that shape our collective future.

In 2015, all United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a shared blueprint for peace, prosperity, and a healthy planet. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cover everything from clean water and climate action to education and gender equality.

Of the 231 unique indicators used to track progress, 52 specifically focus on gender—highlighting how central gender equality is to sustainable development.

Yet progress remains painfully slow.

In 2024, the United Nations reported that gender parity in public leadership and managerial roles has barely advanced. Violence against women and girls remains widespread. And the leadership gap continues to hinder climate and environmental action.

Women have the right to be heard—and the evidence shows that when they are, outcomes improve. Greater participation by women in decision-making is linked to stronger environmental policies, longer-lasting peace agreements, higher business performance, and more resilient communities.

This research paper explores four key questions: Why do we need women in sustainable decision-making? What are the barriers? What solutions exist? And what can Zontians do?

We all influence decision-making—in our homes, workplaces, communities, and clubs. Whether you're engaging with local policy, supporting grassroots efforts, or modelling change in your own life, you have power.

Let's use that power to ensure women are part of the conversation—and shaping a more sustainable future that benefits everyone.

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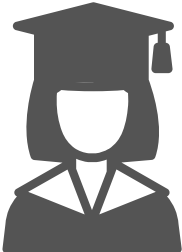

6 REFERENCES



1

KEY FACTS AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DECISION-MAKING: KEY FACTS

Representation	Economic Participation
 <p>27% of parliamentary seats are held by women</p> <p>36% of national climate negotiators are women</p>	 <p>32% of the clean energy workforce are women</p> <p>0.01% of global climate finance supports gender-equal climate initiatives</p> <p>Closing gender gaps could increase global GDP by up to 6%</p>
Education and Skills	Leadership and Influence
 <p>Two-thirds of the world's 781 million illiterate adults are women</p> <p>The digital gender divide limits women's access to STEM careers</p> <p>Women spend up to 3x more time than men in unpaid care and domestic work, restricting their ability to pursue learning and leadership opportunities.</p>	 <p>Countries with more women in government adopt stronger environmental policies</p> <p>Women control around 75% of discretionary purchasing and are more likely to favor ethical, sustainable products.</p>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - 1

Women's full participation in sustainable decision-making is essential for effective, inclusive, and just climate solutions. This Fact Sheet outlines why women must be involved at all levels of climate leadership, the barriers they face, the strategies required to overcome those barriers, and the practical steps Zontians can take to drive change.

Why We Need Women in Sustainable Decision-Making

Women bring unique insights, experiences, and expertise to climate and sustainability decisions. Women leaders are more likely to advocate for stronger environmental, social, and governance (ESG) outcomes.

Countries with a higher proportion of women in political leadership tend to adopt stronger environmental policies. In business, gender-diverse leadership is associated with better ESG performance and increased innovation. In communities, women lead grassroots initiatives that protect biodiversity, conserve resources, and build resilience to climate shocks.

Yet, across all sectors, women remain underrepresented. Elevating women into leadership roles is not only fair—it is strategic. It improves decision quality, strengthens democracy, and builds climate resilience for all.

Barriers to Women's Participation

Despite their critical role, women face persistent barriers that limit their influence in climate and sustainability decisions. These include:

- **Gender Stereotypes and Social Norms:** Deeply ingrained beliefs about women's roles restrict

leadership opportunities from an early age. Media, education systems, and cultural expectations often reinforce these limits.

- **Institutional and Political Barriers:** Women are underrepresented in climate negotiations and science, and are often excluded from decision-making bodies. Bias, tokenism, and gender-based violence further hinder progress.
- **Limited Access to Education and Skills Development:** Girls and women have less access to STEM education, digital technology, and leadership training, particularly in low-income and rural areas. Time poverty and caregiving responsibilities add further obstacles.
- **Economic Barriers:** Women have less access to finance, land, and business opportunities. They receive a tiny fraction of global climate finance, limiting their ability to lead or scale sustainable solutions.

These barriers are systemic and interconnected. Addressing them is vital to ensuring that climate solutions are effective, inclusive, and just.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - 2

Solutions and Strategies for Inclusion

Removing barriers requires coordinated action across policy, education, finance, and community leadership.

- **Gender-Responsive Policies:** International agreements such as CEDAW, the Paris Agreement, and the Sendai Framework provide strong mandates for women's equal participation. National and local policies must embed gender equity into climate planning and budgeting.
- **Capacity Building and Education:** Training programs, mentorship, and feminist leadership development can equip women to lead. Climate literacy and digital access are crucial tools for bridging gender gaps.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Investing in women-led enterprises and funding gender-equitable climate solutions benefits both communities and ecosystems. Gender-responsive budgeting and finance mechanisms, such as the Green Climate Fund, are starting points.
- **Community and Intergenerational Leadership:** Women are already leading through grassroots movements, Indigenous knowledge systems, and youth climate advocacy. Engaging male allies and dismantling structural inequalities is essential to sustainable progress.

By building pathways for women's leadership, we build stronger, more equitable systems for everyone.

What Zontians Can Do

Zontians have a unique opportunity to lead the change by applying the practical Framework for Action:

1. **Gather the Facts:** Stay informed through credible sources. Explore local and national policies to identify gender gaps in climate planning. Attend educational events that raise awareness and promote understanding.
2. **Lead by Example:** Encourage leadership within clubs and promote Zonta's awards and fellowships. Celebrate and support local sustainability champions and integrate environmentally conscious practices into Zonta activities.
3. **Use Our Voice:** Speak out through social media, blogs, and public letters. Utilize campaigns like Zonta Says NOW to amplify messages and support women and youth leading the charge on climate justice.
4. **Advocate:** Call for gender-responsive climate policies and investments in women-led solutions. Support women candidates who prioritise sustainability and advocate for education policies that bring girls into STEM fields.
5. **Collaborate:** Partner with other Zonta clubs, Z and Golden Z clubs, and like-minded organizations. Host joint forums and intergenerational events to build solidarity and expand reach. Celebrate global days, such as International Women's Day and Earth Day, that highlight women's leadership and environmental stewardship.



2

WHY DO WE NEED WOMEN IN SUSTAINABLE DECISION-MAKING?



ENHANCED CLIMATE POLICIES

Women's participation in climate decision-making results in improved outcomes for both gender equality and environmental sustainability.

Women's participation in climate policy is critical to developing effective and equitable environmental governance. Studies show that increased female representation in political bodies correlates with stronger commitments to climate action and environmental protection. For example, a 2021 analysis by the [World Economic Forum](#) highlights that countries with a higher proportion of women in parliament are more likely to implement ambitious climate policies, reflecting a broader perspective on social and ecological well-being.

Despite this, women remain underrepresented in climate decision-making roles. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, "[Gender Equality in Public Administration](#)," women hold only about one-third of senior positions in environmental ministries globally, which limits the integration of gender-sensitive approaches into policy frameworks.

However, when women work as parliamentarians or policymakers, they bring unique lived experiences, especially from frontline and rural communities that are disproportionately affected by climate crises. This insight enriches policy by emphasizing adaptation, resilience, and social equity. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2020 report, [Women's Leadership in Environmental Action](#) stresses that women's leadership

enhances climate policies by incorporating social justice and community resilience, which are often overlooked in male-dominated governance.

Furthermore, women's leadership styles tend to prioritize collaboration, inclusivity, and long-term planning — qualities essential for tackling complex climate challenges. A 2023 brief by FP Analytics, titled "[Accelerating Nature-Based Solutions to Climate Change Through Women's Leadership](#)," finds that women leaders frequently advocate for policies that focus on sustainable development and intergenerational equity, thereby strengthening climate governance outcomes.

To conclude, integrating women's voices in climate policy is not only a matter of equality but a necessity for comprehensive, effective, and just climate solutions. Gender-responsive policymaking leads to stronger outcomes, accelerating progress toward global climate goals. The [UNFCCC](#) emphasizes the importance of gender equality in climate action, highlighting that women's full, equal, and meaningful participation is vital for effective climate governance.



INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING

Inclusive decision-making ensures that policies and programs reflect the experiences and needs of diverse populations.

The inclusion of women, especially in environmental, sustainability, and governance (ESG) planning, leads to more holistic and socially responsive decisions. Studies have shown that gender-diverse groups are more likely to consider a broader range of impacts and long-term consequences when making decisions ([IPCC, 2022](#)).

Women introduce new perspectives that have been shaped by their roles in families, communities, and economies. These experiences can influence policy development, particularly in areas such as health, food security, and resource management. Including women at all levels of decision-making helps ensure that solutions are inclusive and do not reinforce existing inequalities ([IUCN, 2021](#)).

Although there has been significant progress in women's decision-making roles, they remain underrepresented in many sustainability and climate governance structures. For example, in 2023, 36 percent of decision-making positions in national climate delegations were held by women, and globally, as of January 2025, 27 percent of parliamentarians are women.

On the other hand, women are overrepresented at lower levels of decision-making in the public sector, but underrepresented at higher levels in national institutions. The same trend is observed in the judicial system.

Also, this trend is reflected in business, where a major survey found that women made up 23 percent of board members, 8 percent of board chairs and 6 percent of company CEOs.

Such gender imbalance limits the scope and creativity of decisions and reduces the legitimacy of governance processes.

In contrast to gender imbalance, 'participatory democracy' methods enable everyone affected by a particular decision to take part in the decision-making process without discrimination. These methods include town hall meetings, focus groups, public consultations, opinion polls and participatory budgets.

Clearly, embedding women's voices in sustainable decision-making is critical not only for democratic legitimacy but also for practical effectiveness. When women are equal participants in shaping policy, the outcomes are more just, resilient, and responsive to the needs of all people.



DRIVING GREEN ECONOMIC GROWTH

Women's participation in sustainable economic decision-making is a proven catalyst for green growth.

In emerging green sectors, such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and circular economy, women-led enterprises often champion inclusive, community-driven solutions that prioritize equity and environmental sustainability.

Renewable energy jobs are projected to nearly double to 30 million globally by 2030. Women currently represent 32 percent of this workforce, but expanding their role is essential for meeting future labor demands and ensuring sectoral resilience. In Africa and India, women play a central role in deploying decentralised solar energy, thereby creating socio-economic opportunities.

Labor shortages in green industries are intensifying. Between 2015 and 2021, the European Union experienced a twofold increase in green-sector skill gaps. The solar industry warns of an "unprecedented" lack of trained workers, highlighting the need to engage more women and girls in STEM and vocational education.

Women social entrepreneurs are more successful in obtaining venture funding and women-led start-ups outperform male-led ones, generating over twice the revenue per dollar invested.

Gender-diverse leadership correlates with stronger environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance. Firms with more women in senior roles show

improved climate risk disclosures and proactive sustainability strategies.

Closing gender gaps in the labor market could raise GDP by 5-6 percent. Addressing women's health inequities could boost the global economy by one trillion dollars annually by 2040.

Women's income produces extensive social benefits, enabling them to build resilience to climate shocks and establish sustainable livelihoods.

Women are projected to control around 75 percent of discretionary purchasing by 2028 and as they favor ethical and sustainable products, they can influence market dynamics towards greener business practices.

Increasing women's strategic influence in financial services, where they occupy only 18 percent of C-suite positions, is also associated with improved share performance, lower credit risk, and stronger climate action.



WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Across urban centers, regional landscapes, and remote ecosystems, women are leading efforts to protect the environment.

Women's active involvement in environmental stewardship has been instrumental in safeguarding biodiversity, water sources, and air quality—critical to a healthy planet.

In urban areas, women are often community organizers, leading initiatives to improve green spaces, reduce air pollution, and build climate-resilient neighbourhoods. For example, C40 Cities is a global network of mayors committed to applying sustainable urban policies that reduce emissions and enhance public health. C40's Women4Climate initiative empowered women and girls to deliver just climate initiatives. Many cities have included gender perspectives in their climate plans.

In regional and agricultural zones, women play a crucial role in maintaining the health of local ecosystems. They are often the primary stewards of small-scale farms and water resources, applying traditional ecological knowledge to ensure sustainable use.

In Africa and Asia, women-led water committees manage irrigation systems and drinking water access, directly impacting environmental conservation and food security. Empowering women in water governance has been shown to improve both water quality and ecosystem health.

Women are key players in conservation efforts, as their intimate knowledge of local ecosystems and experience with environmental changes often make them the first to notice the impact of deforestation, pollution, or droughts.

Besides possessing age-old knowledge of crops, indigenous women play a crucial role in saving and selecting the seeds of traditional crops, which can be used to replace more water-intensive crops, such as rice and wheat. Indigenous women are guardians of some of the world's most biodiverse and undeveloped lands. They lead conservation efforts in many countries, including on the climate frontlines, in the Amazon, and the Pacific Islands, protecting forests, wetlands, and coral reefs from industrial exploitation.

Globally, women protect endangered species from poachers, plant millions of trees as part of the Green Belt Movement, and restore mangroves and degraded lands. Women's leadership ensures that environmental policies and practices are inclusive, equitable, and effective in addressing the complex challenges of our time.





3

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND SOCIAL NORMS

Persistent gender norms and biases hinder women's participation in sustainable decision-making processes.

Patriarchy—literally "the rule of the father"—describes a system where men control disproportionate power in political, economic, social, and religious domains, reinforcing male privilege and constraining women's opportunities. Gender stereotypes arise within this structure, assigning men and women predefined roles. These stereotypes become especially harmful when they limit women's ability to make life choices, develop skills, or lead. Such norms shape expectations from early childhood, affecting education, careers, and leadership potential.

The UNDP's 2023 Gender Social Norms Index reveals that nearly half of the global population believes men are better political leaders than women, and 40 percent say the same about business leadership. These biases are strikingly consistent across income levels, regions, and cultures. Globally, women account for just over 25 percent of parliamentarians, and only 10 percent of heads of state or government—unchanged since 1995. Women leaders also face disproportionate scrutiny, reinforcing the barriers posed by traditional norms.

In the workplace, stereotypes can cause "stereotype threat," where women internalize biased expectations, leading to reduced performance and confidence. This effect is particularly strong in male-dominated fields, and worsens without visible role models.

Maternal bias further compounds the issue: while fatherhood often boosts men's earnings, motherhood can reduce women's earnings by 4 percent per child. This "maternal wall" unjustly questions women's competence and commitment.

Role models are critical in challenging gender norms. A UK LinkedIn study found 43 percent of women believed they'd be more successful with a relatable role model, while 70 percent said their role models helped them see what was possible despite social barriers. Yet many girls struggle to find diverse role models reflecting their identities, with 60 percent of Australian respondents citing this gap.

Media also plays a powerful role with women's underrepresentation in the media contributing to harmful disrespect and violence towards women. The 6th Global Media Monitoring Project (2020) found that only 24 percent of people featured in global news stories were women. Even in topics deeply affecting women, male voices dominated, reinforcing invisibility and limiting public recognition of women's expertise and leadership.



INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL BARRIERS

Women remain underrepresented in climate decision-making processes, limiting their influence on policies.

Institutional and political systems continue to disadvantage women through formal and informal practices that limit access to leadership roles, suppress influence, and enable violence.

Women remain underrepresented in political decision-making at all levels, especially in climate governance. Of the 51 percent of women government delegates who were registered at the 2022 UNFCCC negotiations, only 40 percent of them were speakers, and they spoke for just 26 percent of the time. To date, only four women have served as COP presidents. Though women are more visible in discussions about adaptation, their presence is notably lower in bodies addressing finance, technology, and mitigation. It is apparent that women's influence is considerably limited in areas critical to shaping climate policy.

In 2024, UN Women reported that women accounted for only 28 percent of environment ministers globally. While 87 percent of gender equality ministers were women, the portfolios they managed often carried less power.

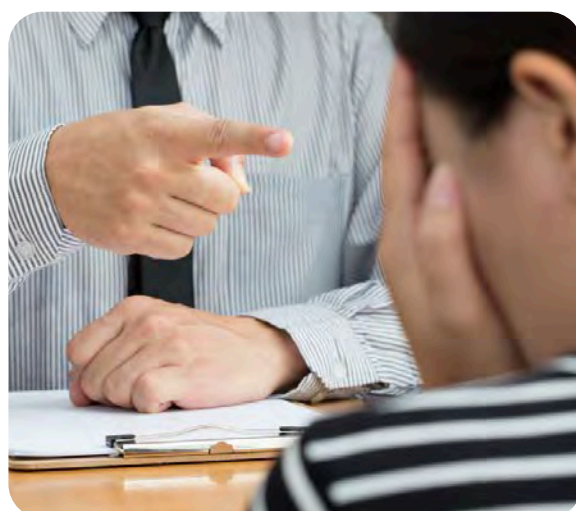
Women's participation in science and technical leadership also lags. At the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), just 30 percent of authors contributing to the Sixth Assessment Report were women—an increase from under 10 percent in 1990, yet still far from parity.

Cultural and institutional biases further impede progress. Many women report avoiding senior roles due to workplace culture or doubts about equal pay. Women also report having less access to powerful sponsors who can advocate for their advancement.

Violence and intimidation are other powerful deterrents in the workplace. The IPU has conducted studies with women MPs in the European (2018), African (2021), and Asia-Pacific (2025) regions and found that between 76-85 percent had faced psychological violence, 46-60 percent had experienced online attacks and 34-47 percent had experienced threats of death, rape, or assault.

Online platforms, while enabling women's voices to progress their leadership, also expose them to relentless harassment.

Tokenism, bias, weak legal protections, and gender imbalance, all contribute to systemic exclusion. Without gender-sensitive policies and accountable institutions, women's equal participation remains an unfulfilled promise.



LIMITED ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Equitable access to education and skills development is vital for empowering women and achieving sustainable, inclusive leadership

UNESCO reports that around 251 million children are not in school—a decline of just one percent since 2015 and three in four children in developing countries cannot read and understand a simple text by age ten. Women dominate teaching roles, yet school leadership remains male-dominated, reinforcing gendered power structures and reducing the visibility of female role models in decision-making. Many women and girls cannot access education due to poverty, early marriage, and gender-based violence. Of the 781 million illiterate adults, two-thirds are women.

Adult learning and citizenship education can play a significant role in shaping a sustainable future. In recent years, the participation of women and youth has considerably improved, but there has been no improvement for migrants, rural populations, older people or people with disabilities.

Time poverty also severely restricts women and girls' ability to pursue learning and leadership opportunities. In most parts of the world, women spend up to three times more time than men on unpaid care and domestic work, which limits their availability for skill development and participation in environmental governance. In addition, adolescent girls worldwide spend nearly five hours a day on unpaid care work—more than double the time spent by boys.

The gender digital divide adds another layer of exclusion. In low-income countries, 90 percent of girls and young women aged 15–24 are offline, compared to 78 percent of boys. Among 32 countries, only 65 girls for every 100 boys have digital skills. Girls are also 13 percent less likely to own mobile phones, limiting access to digital education and advocacy.

Women remain underrepresented in the very fields shaping the green and digital economy. Globally, women make up just 28 percent of engineering graduates, 40 percent of computer science graduates, and 22 percent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) professionals. This underrepresentation limits women's contributions to innovation and decision-making in critical areas such as climate change and technology development.

With AI increasingly shaping societal decisions—from job recruitment to healthcare access—this underrepresentation risks embedding gender bias into the very systems influencing women's lives.



ECONOMIC BARRIERS

Economic disadvantage significantly hinders women's ability to participate in sustainable decision-making.

Even though women form the backbone of many communities and ecosystems, women around the world often lack the financial independence needed to access leadership roles or engage in environmental governance at a local or international level.

Today around 10 percent of women live in extreme poverty and the gender pay gap sees women earning 20 percent less than men. Women are more likely to be in informal, low-paid, or unpaid employment, and this economic dependency reduces their power to influence household or community decisions, or afford further education.

One of the most significant barriers is the lack of control over financial resources. In many regions, women are less likely to own bank accounts, manage their earnings, or make autonomous financial decisions. Women also own less than 20 percent of the world's land despite being responsible for more than half of global food production. This lack of land ownership not only limits their economic security but also their eligibility for credit, insurance, and participation in land-use or climate adaptation planning.

Lack of finance can also hinder women's participation in UN climate negotiations. Women's socioeconomic status plays a significant role in enhancing their participation and representation in political decision-making bodies. Access to power tends to emerge from familial,

communal and economic linkages, which may help explain patterns of participation. A lack of financial resources restricts poor women's opportunities and confidence to risk competing for and maintaining leadership.

The International Finance Corporation estimates that only 7 percent of total private equity and venture funding in emerging markets is targeted towards female-led businesses and, similarly, just 3 percent of philanthropic environmental funding supports girls' and women's environmental activism. Only 0.01 percent of global finance supports projects that address both climate and women's rights. Only 4 percent of total bilateral aid is allocated to gender equality and women's empowerment. The additional investment needed for achieving gender equality by 2030 is estimated at USD 360 billion per year.

Economic barriers are systemic and obstruct women's meaningful participation in sustainable decision-making processes.





4 SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION

FRAMEWORKS SUPPORTING GENDER-RESPONSIVE POLICIES

Creating gender-responsive policies is essential to enabling women's full participation in sustainable decision-making.

Gender-responsive policies are grounded in international human rights frameworks that recognize participation as both a right and a mechanism for achieving sustainable development.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms that "everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country," while the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recognizes that discrimination impedes women's ability to contribute equally in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres.

CEDAW's Article 7 obliges governments to eliminate barriers preventing women from voting, holding public office, and shaping policy. Article 8 extends this responsibility to women's participation at the international level. In 2024, the adoption of General Recommendation No. 40 provided new guidance on achieving gender parity in decision-making across all sectors, including environmental governance and climate risk reduction.

Environmental agreements have increasingly embraced women's leadership. The 2022 UN Resolution 76/300 recognized the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and underscored the vital role of women as leaders and protectors of natural systems. The preamble to the Paris Agreement promotes

gender equality and intergenerational equity, while the Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender commits parties to integrate gender across climate actions, with a ten-year extension to its Gender Action Plan agreed at COP29 in 2024. Similarly, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction has a gender action plan that calls for an increase in women's meaningful participation and leadership in disaster risk governance.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforce these commitments: SDG 5.5 promotes women's leadership in public, economic, and political life, and SDG 16.7 calls for inclusive, participatory governance.

The Pact for the Future (2024) urges states to eliminate legal, social and economic barriers to women's leadership.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), adopted by 189 countries, remains a cornerstone for global gender equality and women in power and decision-making is one of its 12 critical areas of concern. The BPfA is undergoing a revitalization following its 30-year review at CSW69 in 2025.



CAPACITY BUILDING AND EDUCATION

Building women's leadership in sustainable decision-making requires strategic, inclusive, and continuous capacity building.

Education, skills development, and leadership training are essential pathways to ensuring women can meaningfully contribute to, and lead, climate-related decisions.

At the international level, frameworks like the Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender (LWPG) and its associated Gender Action Plan (currently under review) provide a foundation for integrating gender equality into climate policy and practice. Adopted under the UNFCCC, the LWPG calls for building the capacity of women, especially from developing countries, to participate in climate negotiations and national implementation. The Gender Action Plan includes key activities such as training on climate finance, strengthening the role of national gender and climate change focal points, and enhancing access to information and leadership opportunities.

In parallel, initiatives such as WEDO's Women Delegates Fund and the European Capacity Building Initiative provide technical training, mentorship, and peer networks to support women's confidence and expertise in negotiation spaces. These programs bridge knowledge gaps and challenge traditional gender norms by centering women's voices in climate leadership.

At the local level, efforts to cultivate women's leadership must begin with community-rooted education and

empowerment. This includes offering climate literacy programs tailored for women, establishing leadership mentoring networks, and, especially in developing countries, creating safe spaces where women can speak, organize, and plan collectively. Local governments and civil society can promote women's involvement by recruiting them into advisory roles, supporting female candidates in local elections, and funding women-led sustainability projects.

The OECD Toolkit for Gender Equality highlights good practices such as integrating gender into public service management and offering leadership training for women civil servants, and gender equality excellence can be recognised by the UNDP's Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions.

Transformation also requires redefining leadership. Feminist leadership, as championed by UN Women, focuses on power-sharing, community-building, and values-based decision-making—approaches vital for addressing the root causes of inequality and climate vulnerability.



FINANCIAL INCLUSION AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Financial inclusion is a foundation for women's economic agency in a green economy.

Financial empowerment enables women to thrive in green innovation sectors. Around 740 million women worldwide still lack access to formal financial services, often due to missing identification documents or legal restrictions. Globally, digital ID systems, including biometrics, are enabling women to increasingly use mobile banking and fintech services to launch businesses, manage savings, and invest in climate-resilient livelihoods.

The World Bank's Gender Strategy supports governments in reaching women with inclusive financial infrastructure tailored to their national contexts.

Financial literacy is essential. Initiatives such as the UNCDF's 'Leaving No One Behind in the Digital Era' empower women with digital finance skills, improving access to loans, insurance, and clean energy technologies.

Community-level programs further support women in budgeting, savings schemes, and small enterprise development, often linking them with national green investment schemes and climate funds.

Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is a powerful public finance tool that aligns national spending with gender equity and sustainability goals.

UN Women's explainer highlights how GRB integrates gender analysis across government budgets. Their national-level training module provides a step-by-step

guide to implementing GRB from impact assessments to performance monitoring.

Strategic public investment in women-led initiatives yields significant economic and climate dividends. The 2023 Reaching Financial Equality for Women report outlines key enablers such as regulatory reform, digital ID access, and inclusive product design.

The Green Climate Fund integrates gender into climate finance projects and the UN Women's Gender Finance Booklet shows how to incorporate gender considerations into all aspects of decision-making from investments to operations, strategies, management, products, services and customer engagement.

Women entrepreneurs in green tech, clean energy, and climate-smart agriculture often require targeted access to funding and procurement opportunities. Supporting women financially across sectors accelerates inclusive, sustainable development.



WOMEN LEADING CHANGE



Working together across sectors and generations is essential for a just and sustainable future.

Increasing women's leadership in government, on corporate boards, and in civil society has been shown to lead to improved sustainable outcomes.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union has many tools to increase women's representation in parliament, create more family-friendly working conditions and empower women MPs. Half of the countries of the world today use some type of gender quota to increase women's representation in parliament.

Political leadership must be complemented by change in the corporate world. Boards with higher gender diversity are more likely to disclose environmental risks, invest in climate innovations, and support long-term sustainability goals. Companies with at least three women directors had better climate governance. Initiatives like the 30% Club and the IFC Women on Boards and in Business Leadership program support companies to recruit, retain, and empower women leaders in environmental finance and policy.


Civil society has an important role to play. The Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN) empowers grassroots women leaders—particularly Indigenous women—to protect biodiversity and secure climate justice. Their virtual global assemblies bring together women's voices to advocate for climate justice at COP conferences.

The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) works globally to amplify women's voices in local decision-making and climate negotiations and has a Gender Climate Tracker to monitor progress on gender-responsive climate action.

Leadership spans all generations. Fridays for Future began with Greta Thunberg's school strike for climate. Young women are leading court cases and campaigns for stronger action. In Australia, teens challenged the approval of a coal mine for failing to protect their right to a safe climate and older women in Switzerland won a landmark climate ruling in the European Court of Human Rights, arguing that climate change threatens their health and well-being.

Finally, creating space for women in sustainability leadership also requires allyship. The MenEngage Alliance promotes partnerships with men and boys to support gender justice and dismantle structural barriers to women's participation.





5 WHAT ZONTIANS CAN DO

APPLY THE FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION - 1

1. Gather the Facts

- Stay informed about the intersection of gender and climate through credible sources like UN Women, WEDO, WECAN, and Zonta Says NOW.
- Explore national climate plans and gender equality strategies—look for gaps and opportunities to support women's participation.
- Understand local issues by engaging with community reports, climate vulnerability assessments, and women-led sustainability research.
- Use Zonta's own resources and publications to brief members and stakeholders on gender-equal climate action.
- Share success stories of women leaders in climate science, sustainable business, and community organizing to inspire others.
- Attend educational sessions on the impacts of climate change on women and the role women play in driving environmental resilience.

2. Lead by example

- Encourage Zontians to take leadership roles within their clubs, districts, and at the international level.
- Promote Zonta's awards that support future women leaders:
 - Young Women in Leadership Award for emerging community leaders.
 - Women in STEM Award to support women in science and technology.

- Women in Business Leadership Award, which empowers women in business.
- Amelia Earhart Fellowship for women pursuing their Ph.D. in aerospace-related fields.
- Create mentorship programs within clubs to support younger or newer members.
- Recognize and celebrate the women in your club or community who are leading the way in sustainability.
- Integrate sustainability into club operations and events—model the values we promote.
- Support sustainable businesses led by women.

3. Use our voice

- Speak out on issues affecting women and the environment in newsletters, blogs, and social media using facts and solution-focused messages.
- Write letters to newspapers or elected representatives about the need for gender-equal climate leadership.



The Zonta Says NOW Framework for Gender-Equal Climate Action

APPLY THE FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION - 2

3. Use our voice

(Continued)

- Use Zonta advocacy campaigns (like Zonta Says NOW) to engage the public and decision-makers.
- Support campaigns that encourage women and girls to pursue careers in climate action and green industries.
- Share and amplify youth voices and community leaders advocating for climate justice.

4. Advocate

- Advocate for gender-responsive climate policies at local, national, and international levels, aligning with global frameworks such as the Paris Agreement.
- Encourage the adoption of gender quotas or targets in local councils and committees to boost women's leadership.
- Support gender-responsive budgeting by engaging with local budget processes and encouraging investment in women-led climate solutions.
- Endorse women candidates in elections at every level who prioritize sustainability and equality.
- Push for public investment in women-led enterprises, especially those in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and the circular economy.

- Promote education policies that integrate sustainability and encourage girls to enter STEM fields.

5. Collaborate

- Partner with Z clubs and Golden Z clubs to run intergenerational projects on climate and gender equality.
- Team up with like-minded local organizations working on environmental justice and gender rights.
- Engage with global networks such as UNFCCC's Gender and Climate Change workstream or MenEngage Alliance to support inclusive leadership.
- Host joint forums, workshops, or exhibitions with environmental groups, schools, and women's networks.
- Promote collaboration between Zonta clubs to share resources, amplify campaigns, and support international advocacy.
- Celebrate International Women's Day, Mother Earth Day, Day of the Girl Child and 16 Days of Activism with events that focus on women's leadership in sustainability.



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CHAPTER 4

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