

# WOMEN AND GENDER IN CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

BY CALI NATHANSON AND AMY MYERS JAFFE | OCTOBER 2022

Prominent women leaders have played a critical role in the success of global climate negotiations and have contributed to a fuller understanding of the gendered vulnerabilities linked to climate change. The adoption of gender perspectives on climate action ensures that such action not only addresses (rather than reinforces or worsens) gender inequality but also has the greatest possible positive impact on people and the planet.<sup>1</sup> If the 27th global climate Conference of the Parties (COP27) in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in November 2022, is to produce policies that meet the scale of the climate crisis, attending nations must consider the gender balance of their delegations and hosted speakers.

Women's political leadership is integral to climate change political awareness and government action.<sup>2</sup> In many societies around the world, women and girls disproportionately bear the impact of climate change. The United Nations (UN) estimates that around 80 percent of those displaced by climate change are women and girls.<sup>3</sup> This gendered differentiation has fostered women's leading role in climate activism generally, as well as their prominent positioning in nongovernmental organizations focused on climate action.<sup>4</sup> Women have been involved in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process since its inception. While the number of women participants has fluctuated through the years, the quality of women's participation has been notable.

Part of women's contribution to global climate diplomacy has been their integration of a gender perspective, which has been shown to increase the efficiency and efficacy of climate policy by ensuring that it addresses rather than hinders gender equity.<sup>5</sup> If climate policies are to meet the moment, they will need to go beyond economic and technological considerations to address more holistic ones linked to human values, such as equity and the interests of underrepresented groups.

This commentary, part of the Women in Energy Initiative at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy, analyzes the contribution of women to climate diplomacy and the important role of a gender framework in promoting successful climate action, now and going

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forward. It concludes with a set of policy recommendations for national governments and international bodies invested in resolving the climate crisis.

## Recent Gains for Women in Diplomacy

Academic research on women's participation in global negotiations highlights its positive impact on diplomatic outcomes. For example, women's participation in peace negotiations contributes to more durable agreements.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, parties to peace and constitution draft negotiations since 1990 were more likely to reach an agreement when women's groups were influential in the negotiations process than when women's voices were not included.<sup>7</sup>

Women's contributions to peacemaking have been linked to women's greater willingness than men to organize across cultural and sectarian divides.<sup>8</sup> Women have also contributed to diplomatic efforts by staging mass protests and mobilizing public opinion campaigns that influence outcomes. For example, civic campaigns led by women in Northern Ireland were essential to the success of the 1998 public referendum on the Good Friday Agreement and pushed for inclusion of important local community priorities that have supported the postconflict recovery there.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, a growing number of countries have begun to institutionalize gender equality as a foreign policy priority through the use of special envoys, action plans, and foreign aid targets.<sup>10</sup> In 2014, Sweden undertook a comprehensive plan to promote women's leadership in foreign policy and commit explicitly to policies that advanced gender equality. Other major countries, including the United States, have followed suit. As of today, more than 100 United Nations member states, roughly half of all UN members, have adopted national action plans on women, peace, and security.<sup>11</sup>

The track record of women's political leadership is significant to climate policy and policy making. There is a positive association between the level of women's representation in a country's legislative body and the stringency of its climate policies, directly resulting in lower carbon dioxide emissions.<sup>12</sup> Taking one example, in her capacity as German chancellor, Angela Merkel played a pivotal role in organizing the integration of scientific targets into climate agreements, starting with the G8 in 2007. Additionally, women's political representation contributes to higher spending on international health and foreign aid, as well as expenditures more directly relevant to women's needs.<sup>13</sup> That's important for climate change deliberations where direct climate finance and aid from developed nations to the global south for adaptation and mitigation responses are essential to facilitating global agreements and implementation. Ultimately, women's critical role in climate policy stems in large measure from the fact that women, on average, tend to care more about climate change than men.<sup>14</sup> Women leaders also tend to have and maintain better access to local community networks that can inform negotiating positions and broaden understanding of social issues that need to be resolved to promote successful accords.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly important for climate change policy where geographic impacts are unequal, and knowledge of localized effects is evolving. Higher participation from women in climate negotiations can boost the collective intelligence and broaden the perspective of the negotiating group, thus leading to more positive outcomes.<sup>16</sup>



There is a vast academic literature on how gender factors into climate vulnerability. In particular, studies show how existing inequality and power imbalances in various societies can inhibit the resilience of women and girls to climatic events and impacts.<sup>17</sup> Gendered patterns of adaptation to climate change events and challenges are related less to feminized intrinsic vulnerability of women to climate risks than to cultural and socioeconomic contexts in which resource scarcity and disaster response and planning might disadvantage women. In many locations, for instance, women are less likely to own land and other resources that might protect them in a climate-related disaster<sup>18</sup> or may have less access to institutional support and information than their male counterparts.<sup>19</sup> Gender-focused work in Bangladesh shows higher rates of mortality during natural disasters for women, who, in certain locales, are not allowed to participate in public meetings and therefore are less apt to receive disaster and emergency preparedness information or receive medical and food assistance in the aftermath of such an event.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, evidence from sub-Saharan Africa suggests the rising challenge of resource scarcity disproportionately harms women and girls, whose daily work is more homebound and highly dependent on access to water and wood fuel, making them less able to migrate for employment or food access.<sup>21</sup> Thus, some scholars argue that a rights-based approach to climate change policy is needed to ensure gender representation, equity, and empowerment.<sup>22</sup>

The differentiated gendered experiences and requirements related to climate change highlight the importance of elevating diverse women leaders—not only from different countries but also from different settings, such as cities and rural regions—in global climate negotiations. Drawing on their deep links to local communities, women leaders can provide a deeper understanding of needs related to climate finance and adaptation response, energy access and mitigation, and institutional capacity building. They have also tended to take a more activist role in demanding climate action by governments.<sup>23</sup>

## Women in Climate Negotiations

Similar to foreign diplomacy, climate change diplomacy has benefited from the enormous contributions of women leaders. For example, Patricia Espinosa, former UN climate chief, was among those who catalyzed the \$100 billion climate fund at the Cancun Agreements to aid the developing world's climate response. Angela Merkel presided over the first UN climate conference in Berlin in 1995 as Germany's environment minister, and then as chancellor she played a pivotal role in convincing the G8 to agree to the necessity of carbon emissions-reduction targets based on the science of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007. Laurence Tubiana, special representative of France to COP21 in 2015, played a key role in negotiating the Paris Agreement, among other important women leaders, including Christiana Figueres, former executive secretary of the UNFCCC.

More broadly, women's participation in climate negotiations has grown since the first COP in 1995, though not necessarily in linear fashion.

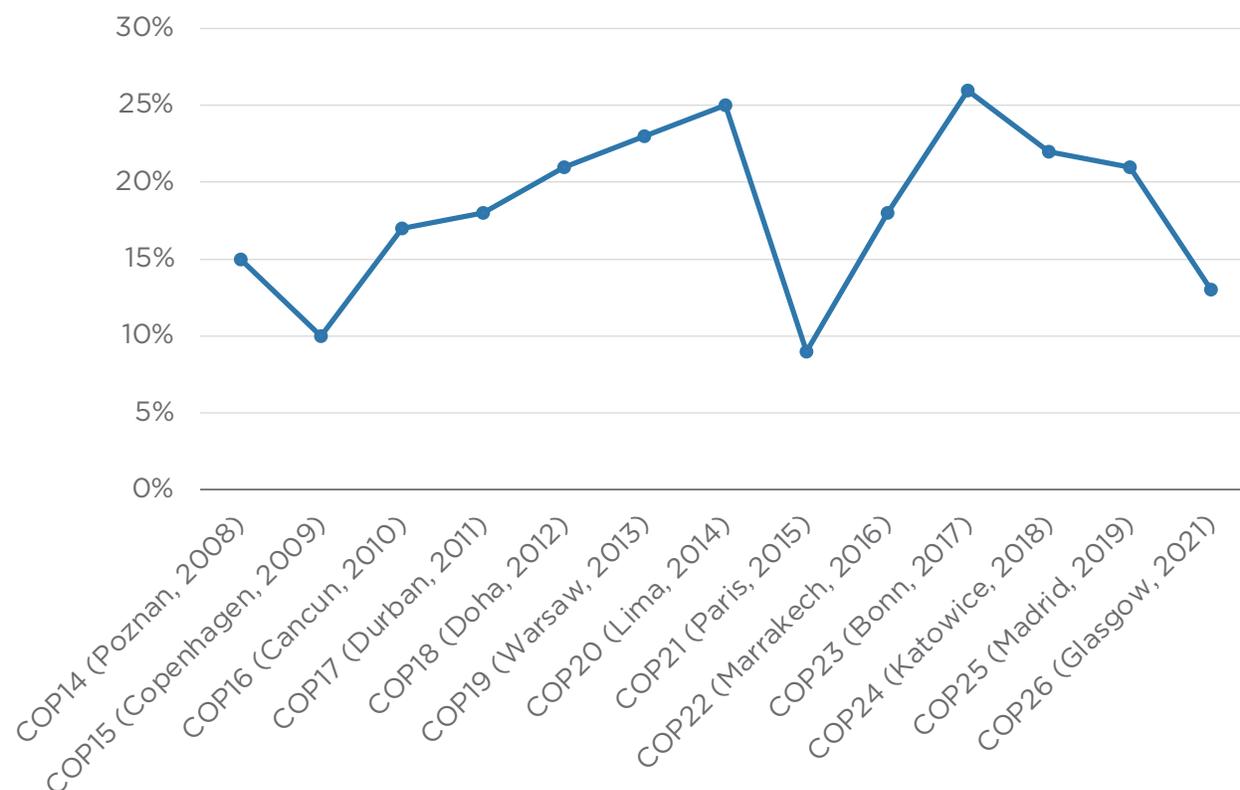
## Women Heads of Delegations

Since the UNFCCC began tracking women's participation in climate negotiations, the percentage of women heads of delegations has been continuously low (see Figure 1). Between



2008 and 2011, for instance, it remained below 20 percent. The peak was only 26 percent at COP23 in Bonn in 2017, and the three COPs since then have followed a downward trend.

**Figure 1:** Percentage of female heads of delegation, 2008–2021



Source: Gender Climate Tracker, “Percentage of Women Heads of Delegation,” accessed July 2022, <https://genderclimatetracker.org/womens-participation-party-delegations>.

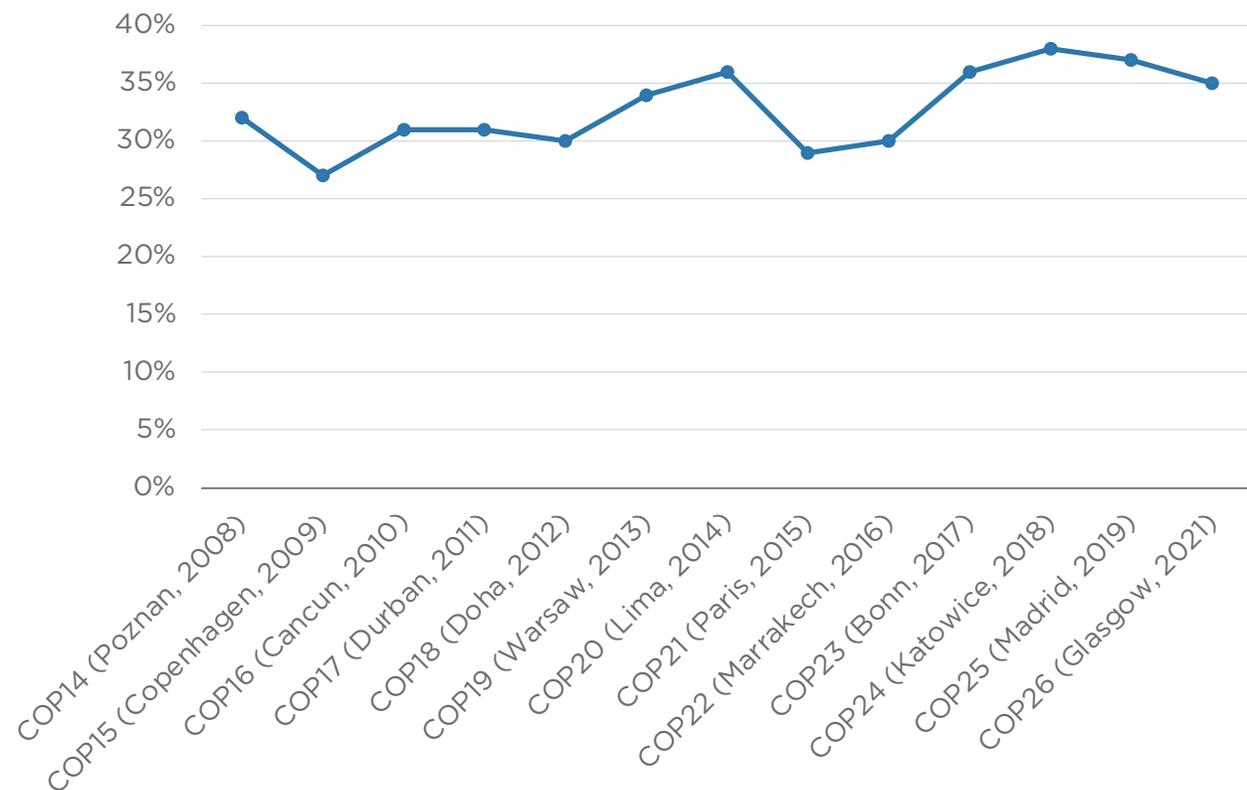
## Women Delegates

At the first COP in 1995, only 18 percent<sup>24</sup> of the delegates in attendance were women. Between 2008 and 2012, an average of 32 percent of UNFCCC delegates were women, thus marking an improvement.<sup>25</sup> As mentioned previously, however, this progress was not linear (see Figure 2). Given that women make up 50 percent of the global population, it was also insufficient. At COP23 in Bonn, women made up 37 percent<sup>26</sup> of the climate delegates present. Among the 11,306 national delegates at COP24 the following year, 38 percent<sup>27</sup> were women, increasing by only 1 percent despite increased policy commitments and activities meant to promote equal gender participation. Most recently, at COP26, only 35 percent of attending delegates were women. At the meeting, Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley stated that



“both ambition and needed faces are not present in Glasgow.”<sup>28</sup> Despite increased initiatives and efforts toward gender equity, the gender balance is still lopsided.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of female party delegates, 2008–2021



Source: Gender Climate Tracker, “Percentage of Women Party Delegates,” accessed July 2022, <https://genderclimatetracker.org/womens-participation-party-delegations>.

## Women’s Participation in Constituent Bodies

The UNFCCC’s gender composition report has two components: the gender breakdown of national delegations to COP meetings, which was previously discussed, and the gender breakdown of technical and decision-making bodies, which are known as constituted bodies. Although the changes to the gender balance in the latter bodies are inconsistent, often fluctuating from year to year, several of them reached over 50 percent women’s participation: in 2018, the Adaptation Committee had 56 percent women’s membership, and the Paris Committee on Capacity-Building had 58 percent. In 2021, the Adaptation Committee reached 63 percent women’s membership,<sup>29</sup> though the Clean Development Mechanism Executive Board saw only 10 percent, highlighting the aforementioned inconsistency.<sup>30</sup>



Positive trends in women’s participation at constituted body meetings were reported in 2019 but reversed a year later. In 2019, 8 out of 13 constituted bodies had women’s representation surpassing 38 percent.<sup>31</sup> In 2020, however, only 5 out of 15 constituted bodies met that threshold.<sup>32</sup> In 2019, 2020, and 2021, women governmental delegates occupied 33 percent of all positions in constituted bodies, showing that women’s participation has not progressed substantially since 2018. In some cases, women’s membership in constituted bodies decreased.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, at the virtual May/June Subsidiary Body for Implementation meetings in 2021, there was equal registration of male and female government delegates. At plenary meetings in the same year, which are meetings attended by all delegates, men made up 60 percent of active speakers and spoke 74 percent<sup>34</sup> of the time in the plenary, showing that there is a difference between equal registration and equal participation.

As part of their leadership work, women have injected an integral gender perspective into climate action at the highest levels. At the first COP in Berlin in 1995, an international women’s forum—Solidarity in the Greenhouse—was convened in parallel to the official meeting and presented a letter of requests to the chair of the COP, Angela Merkel. The goal was to integrate gender perspectives, viewpoints, and considerations into policies to be endorsed through the UN COP processes. At COP6 in The Hague, Netherlands in 2000, a side event on “feminine values” related to climate change brought increased attention to the role of women in the negotiations. The next COP in Marrakech, Morocco, included a formal endorsement in which, going forward, the UN Secretariat should determine the gender composition of the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol bodies and promote more nominations of women. At COP13 in Bali in 2007, a worldwide network of women for climate justice was established. The president of the Bali conference, Indonesian Minister of Environment Rachmat Witoelar, declared a commitment to mainstream gender equality into COP processes and outcomes.

By COP21 in Paris in 2015, gender-specific references were incorporated into the Preamble, Purpose, Adaptation, Finance, and Capacity-Building sections of the draft agreement, building on work developed at plenary meetings at the Lima Work Program on Gender in 2014. COP decision 1/CP21, which annexes the Paris Agreement, explicitly mentions gender equality and empowerment of women as fundamental to climate action. At COP25, parties agreed to a five-year enhanced Lima work program (36.CP7) regarding gender participation and a related gender action plan.

These efforts are a good starting point, but more can be done to elevate gender analysis and integrate inclusive perspectives into diplomatic discourse and solution building for the global climate crisis. As this commentary lays out, drawing more women diplomatic leaders and activists into global climate policy work not only enables them to contribute more robustly to climate processes and frameworks but also offers opportunities to fashion solutions that will be more sustainable and just.

## Recommendations: COP27 and Beyond

The following policy recommendations can help to achieve this important outcome.

The United Nations, in its Women Watch fact sheet on climate change and gender, calls on governments to “incorporate gender perspectives into their national policies, actions plans,



and other measures on sustainable development and climate.” If governments wish to heed this call, they will need to carry out systematic gender analysis, including for nationally determined contributions and national adaptation plans, and establish gender-sensitive benchmarks, including for climate negotiation roles. Countries should also work to ensure women are equally included on the docket for plenary speeches at the COPs to increase visibility of diverse perspectives and give women leaders equal access to this important element of the negotiating process.

As influential geopolitical actors in climate negotiations, the United States, China, and the European Union are well positioned to take a bolder stance on promoting women’s leadership in global climate talks, including by ensuring equal representation in climate change bodies. The United States took the important step of establishing an ambassador-at-large position at the US Department of State with a singular focus on global women’s issues, including women’s economic empowerment and women’s roles in disaster responses, health, and climate adaptation. Other governments should follow suit, and the ambassadors at large should be included in national delegations to COP meetings. Governments should also incorporate training on gender equality and climate change for all delegates attending UNFCCC meetings and workshops and monitor their officially sponsored side events to ensure gender equality on panels and among presenters.

Particular care must be given to the inclusion and equal participation of indigenous women. Although making up only 6.2 percent of the worldwide population, indigenous people protect 80 percent of remaining biodiversity and 25 percent of land surface worldwide. Indigenous women have been leading the resistance against natural resource exploitation and climate change, from the Kainai women’s blockade against Murphy Oil in 2011 in Southern Alberta to Aleta Baun and the Mollo peoples’ protests against mining in 2007 on Timor Island, which eventually forced all mining companies to leave the area. The voices and perspectives of indigenous women on the front line of the fight against climate change can help sharpen the policy proposals of the United States and other governments and widen their impact.

Similarly, the perspectives and knowledge bases of young women climate activists must be incorporated into policy action and applied by policy makers. One idea is to give young women climate activists and groups a platform at international negotiations, where they can also receive formal training and preparation for serving as delegates. For instance, youth women forums could be run in parallel to COP, giving participants the chance to debate and formulate policy proposals that can then be incorporated into official COP meetings.

To ensure that women are adequately prepared to participate fully in international climate deliberations, the United Nations should expand training programs for women delegates, especially those from least developed countries where resources may be constrained, including virtual or hybrid programming. The United Nations should also consider providing travel support for women to attend and speak at official events as well as side events at COPs. For their part, major donors to the United Nations’ system should ensure that sufficient finance has been targeted toward achieving gender equality in official global climate meetings, both for COP and for constituted bodies. Such funding could be used to target training and travel assistance to support the mission of reaching 50 percent participation in climate-related activities.



Most pointedly, given that COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in November 2022 is expected to have a significant focus on climate adaptation and climate adaptation finance, as well as women's proportionally high participation in disaster recovery, small-scale agriculture, and social care roles, women's voices should be featured at the meeting in all aspects, including as delegates, plenary speakers, participants, and speakers in the many side events that will be associated with the climate meetings.

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