

Gender in Climate Governance: Telling Numbers but Who is Listening?

An interview with Jennifer Kwao, Karen Morrow

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Until 2011, gender did not have a formal place on the United Nations' climate agenda. Now the UN boasts of roadmaps, action plans, and work programmes hoping to spur the inclusion of women in national and international climate action. Yet the gender balance in COP delegations remains at 75 per cent male to 25 per cent female. The United Kingdom, the host of COP26, is led by a male-dominated team, while many voices from the Global South are locked out of the conference. Professor Karen Morrow explains what climate governance's gender divide looks like, what the key battles for COP26 are, and why gender justice is crucial to combatting climate change.

Jennifer Kwao: What are the gendered impacts of climate change?

Karen Morrow: Climate change is gendered. It is gendered because the society that produces it is gendered, as are the economic system and industry. A recent report in *The Guardian* showed that only eight of the top 100 FTSE companies listed on our stock exchange are led by women. Equally, science is gendered and so is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) system.

The worst impacts of climate change are felt by those who are least to blame for causing it and most exposed to risks, usually through poverty. In many parts of the world, the responsibility for food production, as well as preparation, lies with women. Access to water is usually women's work. And where climate change makes those things more difficult, women are the ones who bear the consequences; it's the girls who get taken out of school to help with the extra time it takes to provision everyday life.

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While the gendered impacts of climate change are everywhere, they are experienced very differently in different societies. For example, there are all sorts of vulnerabilities attached to displacement – we don't call people climate refugees, but that's what they are. Work on disasters like Hurricane Katrina has shown that women are least well positioned to insulate themselves from shocks. In these situations, women are vulnerable to domestic violence,

sexual predatory violence, and loss of precarious incomes.

An intersectional analysis also shows that women and the LGBTQIA+ community are among the poorest and the least insulated from any kind of systemic shock, be it economic or environmental.

Looking at the UNFCCC regime, why is it relevant to talk about gender? What and who are we talking about? Who are we leaving out?

Until 2011, women did not have official status as a regime stakeholder group in the UNFCCC process. That was when the gender constituency was recognised in the UNFCCC regime and that always shocks people to hear. It was 2011 before women participated as a formal stakeholder group. That's nearly 20 years after the convention was signed. Active efforts to improve women's participation followed the grant of constituency status, albeit progress has been fitful and limited. By way of illustration: since 2020, the overall percentage change in membership of UNFCCC bodies is negligible. In 2020, only three of the 16 bodies had a 50 per cent female membership or above; three had 40 per cent or above; six had 30 per cent or above; four had 20 per cent or under. We're talking about representation that only really gained momentum after the [Lima work programme](#) and the gender action programme.

Gender is still seen as a women's issue in the UN system. But a gender-equal and gender-just approach to climate change needs to have male buy-in and needs to include people who are not part of the dominant cisgender set up. Change is happening at the grassroots, but equal representation is a human rights shift that is yet to happen. Nearly half a century after Hillary Clinton's "women's rights are human rights" [speech](#) in Beijing, we're still trying to make a case for things that should already be in force.

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Slow progress towards gender justice isn't enough anymore. Climate change is so complex and so far-reaching that we, as a species, are robbing ourselves of the different perspectives that might help us better engage with the challenges it poses. Critical talent and experience is overlooked. In adaptation, for example, women on the ground in Africa who are having to provide for their families, having to go farther for wood, having to grow different things because the climate is literally changing around them, they have learnt so much the very hard way, but for many years have not had an adequate platform to share what they have learnt .

Our strength comes from diversity, not uniformity. So, it's good to see indigenous people taking a much more pro-active role, saying, "we have things we can teach you!" and not waiting to have something foisted upon them that doesn't fit with their worldview and doesn't fit with the environment they understand very, very well.

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Why does the UNFCCC focus on a quantitative approach to representation? The numbers don't even show much change.

The UNFCCC now issues a [gender composition report](#) every year. In the 2021 report, this contained a very revealing case study of speaking time in virtual plenaries and meetings on technology and finance from May to June 2021. The report aggregated data by gender and age, examining who was speaking and for how long. The results are revealing, even though counting speaking time is quite a blunt instrument.

In the first instance, looking at eight plenary meetings, the report observed more women participating, because the online format facilitated circumventing some of the gendered constraints on joining international meetings (childcare responsibilities for example). Where plenaries were concerned, men formed 51 per cent of delegations, 60 per cent of those who spoke and accounted for 63 per cent of speaking time. Once session chairs were taken out of the equation, men accounted for 60 per cent of those who spoke and 74 per cent of the speaking time. That sends a stark message in terms of who is talking. It does not, however, look at what they're saying so cannot tell us what influence people had on the debate. We might infer that if you speak more you will have more of an opportunity to influence outcomes – but it depends on what you're saying. If you're a chair, you will speak more, but you'll often be housekeeping or inviting people to speak. You're taking time and using words but you're not changing the outcomes.

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Why do you think the UN relies so much on measurement and indicators?

It's a general preoccupation of modern societies. If you look at the Sustainable Development Goals, for example, the indicators for them are driven by measurable metrics. They look at things you could tick a box on and measure easily. And they often focus on quantity rather than quality even though they're supposed to be achieving qualitative changes in the end. So a preoccupation with the quantitative is not unique to the UNFCCC.

We also need to consider the nature of international law and the role of the UNFCCC. Its secretariat has no real power over the states that populate it. You cannot compel a state to do the right thing. You cannot really compel a state to even give effect to the human rights it's signed up to. But you can embarrass them when they don't. The nationally determined contributions (NDCs, country plans to cut carbon emissions) are a similar idea by making states set down on paper what they think their contributions are going to be. That gives you something to measure when it comes to walking the walk instead of just talking the talk. It's

understandable, from that point of view.

If states don't feel embarrassment about not bothering to include a gender-equal perspective in their society and delegations, then you lose that lever; there's no shame to motivate them.

Are quantitative approaches enough to force states to ensure that their negotiating teams are representative?

While I do think quantitative approaches are never going to be adequate, they are, at least, a factual base from which to argue. The gender constituency in the UNFCCC won their place by using factual information to make their case. It's very hard-headed, and it's had to be, because it's not wanting to be seen as soft, feminine, and emotion-driven in a system that is based on evidence.

The more public those are, the better. I don't think people realise how hugely dominated by men international law and policy spaces are. But, then again, look at our national parliaments. It comes back to women's participation in public life, in politics, but also in running state systems, it's hugely problematic. In the UK, more than half of law students are female; yet you look at our highest courts and you find a tiny number of women sitting in them.

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In the UK team for COP26, there's only one woman at the top table. There are lots of women involved in junior positions. The one woman at the top table was only added after there was a public outcry. This means the UK's COP26 leadership is male-dominated - those are the people who will be talking.

It's a systemic issue. These things change very slowly and unless they're really reflected on and we facilitate those changes to make sure we're embracing the whole range of human talent and voices, we impoverish not only women and non-cisgender people, but everyone.

Let's talk about COP26. What can we expect from a COP with a dismal record on representation? What are some of the key battles going to be?

I've been looking at COPs for a long time and what will happen is that there will be a lot of talk -there's always a lot of talk. Greta Thunberg's "blah blah blah" speech - she's not wrong. Whatever is achieved, however little it is, will be packaged as progress. The problem is that we can't just evolve. We need revolution. We need to change direction.

The emissions reduction plans, the NDCs, aren't on track. At the moment, they seem to be leading to a 3-degree increase in temperature, not the 1.5 that we need as a politically endorsed minimum - to be honest, we probably need more than that. It's deeply, deeply depressing: the lowering of expectations with the mantra for this COP of "keeping 1.5 degrees alive" - tells us two very important things: It's not a given that that aspiration will

continue to motivate; and even if it did, it wouldn't be enough. So "keeping 1.5 degrees alive" is not aspirational. The least COP26 needs to do is to bring it back into the frame and, if you like, renew our focus.

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Funding will be a major issue. The international community promises funding for the developing world in all areas – not just climate change. That is not charity; it is an investment in everybody's future. But it is never seen as that and never fully delivered. So, funding will be the issue. We'll see people saying the right things, and the US has, at least, agreed to double their climate contribution which may encourage others.

What types of funding need to be debated? And why is it important to have it on the agenda?

We need to look at all of finance and that includes subsidies. I read something that really horrified me recently. The IMF has just done some work on fossil fuels subsidies and at the moment, globally, as of 2020 figures, we are subsidising fossil fuels to the tune of 11 million dollars a minute. It's not just that our house is on fire: we are paying fossil fuel companies to throw fuel on that fire!

We should be talking about not financing climate vandalism. We know what the problem is, and it is ludicrous that we are paying – either in direct subsidies or in preferential taxes – big fossil fuel companies to keep producing fossil fuels. Nobody is talking about it and it needs to be talked about!

We also need to be providing the money we promised to enable countries to leapfrog over the really dirty aspects of development that we have had in the past. If we stop paying big fossil fuel companies to add to our problems, the money we would be saving could be used to help those most impacted by climate change. We need to be thinking more creatively and more holistically.

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Stopping subsidies would actually get us on to another problem everyone is talking about: carbon pricing. According to the IMF study, nobody in the world is getting it right in terms of just the industry inputs, let alone the environmental costs. Implementing fully accurate and comprehensive carbon pricing is virtually impossible but making fossil fuels unprofitable to produce could at least cut down the magnitude of the problem. So, finance needs to be looked at, but all of finance, not just the little bits that look promising for profit-making. Everybody cannot make a profit from this but, at the moment, everybody is paying.

The Global Women's Assembly in a statement for COP26 calls for a human rights and inclusive approach to climate action that draws on leadership from frontline communities and people across the gender spectrum. With such actors stepping forward, what role can organisations, such as the EU and UN, play in uplifting these voices and taking on what they're putting forward?

Lead by example. That's the place to start. Not just putting your money where your mouth is, but putting your women on your committees too. This can change the nature of the discussion and outcomes. Research has shown that decision-making bodies and parliaments with more women in them think differently about environmental issues and decide differently on them.

One of the things we can do in the developed world is provide funding. We have money and the UN has resources. Internships – those don't even cost us money. Providing living expenses or enough for someone to survive on while they see how these things work can be impactful. Bringing women from all over the world into the building and into the room to facilitate learning by seeing...it's really important.

Mentoring. Training. Capacity building. We have *huge* resources of talent in the women at the UN and EU which can be used to inspire and equip other women. Covid-19 has taught us what is possible online. Using more online workshops and things like that – masterclasses, summer schools, things where you can learn and get a qualification or certificate in climate advocacy or gender analyses of climate issues – can empower many.

A lot of what you're talking about speaks to the systemic connection between climate change and discrimination. How do we even begin to dismantle the system?

We begin by calling it out; by showing the system's shape and what influences it. We know, of course, that women are silenced everywhere across the globe, and we know that damages us all. So, we should call it out for what it is.

Sustainability, on an environmental level, requires us to think in a joined-up way, so does social justice. We can't think in silos. It doesn't matter how advanced your policies are: if some countries don't measure up then we all suffer. We need to think like a species.

Networks are everything. The gender constituency in the UNFCCC built the networks that it used to make the case for its very existence. They used alliance building to build feminist approaches because not all women are the same. They recognised that we all tend to be minorities in these systems so learning from each other and building solidarity is one of the ways in which we can start to unpick the system.

Climate change is not just about science and industry, it is about people and promoting an ecologically literate approach to what it means to be human. Up until now, we have been wrecking and destroying all round for short-term gain. That's now going to destroy us as a species if we don't change our ways. Recent studies in behavioural psychology show that we can educate ourselves out of our toxic ways of being in the world. We need to learn from South American activists on the rights of nature and from the indigenous cosmologies, who remind us that nature is where we all start.



Jennifer Kwao is the editorial assistant of the *Green European Journal*. She holds an MA in European Studies from KU Leuven, where she wrote her master's dissertation on Ghana's colonial legacy in its trade and development relations with the EU and China.



Karen Morrow has lectured at the Universities of Buckingham, Durham and Leeds and the Queen's University of Belfast and has been a Professor at Swansea University since 2007. Karen's research interests focus on theoretical and practical aspects of public participation in environmental law and policy and on gender and the environment. She was founding co-editor of the *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment*. She is a founder member and part of the core team of the related Global Network for the Study of Human Rights and the Environment (GNHRE).

She serves on the editorial boards of the *Environmental Law Review*. She is a series editor for Edward Elgar's *Critical Reflections on Human Rights and the Environment* series. She is an associate member of the Monash European and EU Law Centre and has held visiting faculty status at the Katholieke Universiteit of Leuven. She was a member (2013-2016) of the EU's COST network working group on "Gender, Science, Technology and Environment" (genderSTE). She was a founding member of the Environmental and Planning law Association of Northern Ireland (EPLANI) and is a member of the United Kingdom Environmental Law Association (UKELA).

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