

Can Improving Women's Representation in Environmental Governance Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions?

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Introduction

The Paris Agreement's clause to include more women in the environmental decision-making process set a historical precedent. The preamble urges parties to acknowledge that climate change is a common concern of humankind and to act accordingly. Decision-making, it insists, must account for the human rights of vulnerable populations, "as well as gender equality [and the] empowerment of women."¹

The intersection of gender and climate change is a location of acute vulnerability, one which is recently gaining more attention. It is well-documented that women, generally underrepresented in government and industry, often bear the brunt of climate change effects. As caregivers and providers, women are in the front lines of environmental disaster, and represent 80% of persons displaced by climate change.²

Women are not simply casualties of climate change, however. The growing body of work demonstrating how women manage resources, consume energy, and prioritize climate change differently than men is important to any meaningful discussion of the intersection of female empowerment and climate change. Rather than simply being another highly threatened group, women can be integral to the solution. Evidence seems to support the theory that advancing leadership of women in environmental governance across the world would reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Women Managing Emissions: Trends

Women as a group have significant experience managing emissions, as they globally make the majority of decisions affecting how households consume energy.³ It seems that these decisions are often mindful and prudent. Analysis of women's energy consumption finds that in the western world, women use 22% less energy on average than men.⁴ Less energy use- whether in the form of fewer automobile trips, less consumption of meat and processed beverages, or increased household energy efficiency- causes lower CO2 emissions.

The smaller carbon footprint of women could result from unintentional trends having to do with social and economic position in society or the increased willingness of women to change daily habits to save energy and protect the environment (as compared to men).⁵ In any case, a wealth of data suggests that women who manage energy and resources in everyday life consistently decide to conserve and minimize emissions in contrast to their male counterparts.

Women in Social/Commercial Leadership & Emissions

When positioned as leaders, women are more likely to use their power to reduce emissions in a number of ways, from starting renewable energy companies to choosing sustainable options and minimizing household fossil fuel use.⁶ Fighting difficult odds, women have found innovative ways to advance in commerce and community leadership, working to protect the climate and their own vulnerabilities to disaster.

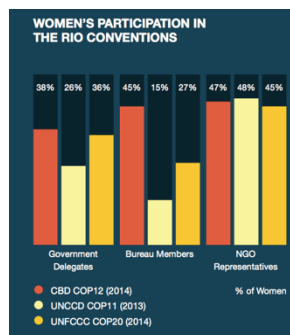
Even in countries that are not known for energy efficiency or renewable energy use, women attempting to counteract the acute threat of pollution and climate change. A women's mosque in India converted to solar energy as part of an effort to compensate for Uttar Pradesh's poor air quality and lagging progress in renewable energy.⁷ A community of women in Tajikistan have also arisen as leaders in solar, learning how to harness the energy to heat water.⁸ There are countless such examples clearly indicating the promise of women as environmental leaders in a variety of contexts, however even in developed countries the path to leadership is not an easy one.

Underrepresented Women in Environmental Governance

Women are grossly underrepresented in government, limiting their access to decision-making. The U.S. ranks 104th in the world for women in government, and Europe, while ahead of much of the world, claims only 29 to 37 percent women in government bodies. These are all below gender the balance zone of 40 to 60 percent women.⁹ Without a place at the table in general government, it is difficult for women to contribute to expansive and meaningful greenhouse gas emission reductions.

Within environmental governance specifically, the numbers also continue to lag. At the 2015 Paris summit, just over 38% of national delegations participants were women and since 2008 women on average have made up just over 30% of delegates at the annual UN Climate summit.¹⁰ While some inclusion is better than none, the top roles on COP summits continue to be taken by men.¹¹ The Environmental and Gender Information database reports that of 890 environmental leadership positions analyzed in 193 UN Member States, only 12 percent of heads of environment sector ministries were women.¹² Although the issue of gender equality at conventions and in representation is now being discussed more broadly, it remains the case that the majority of people making decisions on the fate of the Earth's climate are not representative of half its population: a half that may prove vital to the protection of a dwindling ozone layer.

HEADS OF NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL SECTOR MINISTRIES



(graphics credit: International Union for the Conservation of Nature, UN Women)

Women in Governance & Emissions Reductions

When women do enter leadership positions in environmental decision-making, there is a trend towards shrinking emissions. Women are consistently more motivated than men to accomplish reductions, perceiving climate change as a greater threat and addressing that threat in a more risk-averse manner.¹³ As a study published on gender and CO2 emissions says, “Since women, to a greater extent, are expected to suffer the consequences of climate change, their utility of avoiding these consequences can reasonably be assumed to be higher than men's.”¹³

This translates into effective government and strong emissions reductions. Studies examining the empowerment of women’s political empowerment and CO2-emissions finds a negative correlation between the two.¹³ This correlation indicates that increasing women’s access to power within environmental governance could lead to women's concerns for CO2-emissions being taken into account.

This theory is further supported by an article asserting that, due to various forms of sex discrimination in the electoral process, the women who successfully reach office in congress are often exceptionally hardworking, talented, and qualified.¹⁴ Consequently, they are typically more legislatively productive and more effective at constituency service than their male counterparts. Applied to environmental governance, this evidence suggests that when voters are able to choose from a large pool of people, including women, they will select candidates that are especially talented and well-suited to the job. This could lead to more effective and frequent pushes for emissions controls. As the world searches for viable solutions and antidotes to climate change, it is worth noting that the ethical goal of including women in leadership has a particular effect on better governance and environmental issues.

Conclusion: Current Trends, how to Help

Climate change and gender imbalance in governance are critical global problems, but there are signs of change. Though by no means equal yet, the percentage of women in leadership roles in environmental negotiation is increasing (women held six of the most influential positions at 2016 global climate talks, compared to two in 2015).¹⁵ Gender equality within environmental governance is becoming a more distinct focus of organizations such as the United Nations, with Achala Abeyasinghe, legal advisor to the 48 least developed countries at UN negotiations, saying, “We have to further rally around and accelerate progress towards more equal participation of men and women in this process.”¹⁵ Given the great impact climate change has on women, and their crucial role in fighting it, it is possible that environmental issues (and specifically UNFCCC negotiations) may offer the offer the potential for the empowerment of women, giving them a new voice in negotiations and an important role in emissions control.¹⁶

Most importantly, numerous tactics employed across the world to fight gender inequality in government, any and all of which can be adapted to increase the percentage of women at the helm of environmental decision-making. Organizations such as the European Institute for Gender Equality are pushing for a better gender balance in governance and policy-making. UN Women is working with various initiatives to increase women in leadership: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development goals. They also provide general training for women political candidates to help build

their capacity, advocating for legislative and constitutional reforms to ensure women's fair access to political spheres.¹⁶

Social organizations aimed at public perception of women as leaders is also a vital part of the solution. A UN report claims that women's movements for equal representation are important in the process of increasing the numbers of women in legislatures, including "public awareness-raising campaigns to combat negative stereotypes, emphasize the legitimate role of women in decision-making processes at all levels, and encourage women's participation in decision-making."¹⁶

Last, there is the option of instituting actual quotas in government. Quotas, when implemented correctly, have proved a promising tactic for beginning and maintaining growth and advancement of women in government. A review of eleven randomized evaluations in Afghanistan, Lesotho, and 24 states in India found that reservation quotas influenced women's political participation, improved men's perceptions of women as leaders, increased the aspirations of girls, and helped women get elected even after the quotas were removed.¹⁷ In studies of eight EU countries researchers saw significant increases in female representation in government through election quotas supplemented with rank order rules.¹⁸ As noted in a UN Report: "quotas have been an effective tool to increase women's access to decision-making [...] sixteen of the twenty countries that have reached the target of 30 percent women in national legislatures use some type of quota."¹⁶

Quotas are by no means a panacea and there exists no one size fits all model. They must be customized to specific social and political contexts to achieve a positive effect and should be combined with training skills and development. If implemented correctly, however, quotas could establish some lasting gender balance in UN climate negotiations, environmental ministries, and other climate change governance.

The Paris Convention declared climate change an imminent threat not only to commerce, nature, and animals, but to the universal human rights, especially of at-risk populations. We must protect the vulnerable, not through arbitrary decisions but through inclusion and assisted participation. At the same time, we must recognize that perceiving women primarily as victims suffering at the hands of unregulated climate change, has gone hand-in-hand with overlooking their promise as problem-solvers and leaders, whose potential for reducing destructive emissions is going largely untapped. Representation will not skyrocket on its own, and to reap the benefits that women have to offer in the realm of environmental protection and reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, active steps should be taken to actively advance women and compensate for gender differences in environmental governance globally. This is not only wise and fair, it may also be helpful to mitigating climate change. We will need the best resources and the best leadership to avert disaster.

Charlotte Collins received her Bachelor's Degree in English Literature and Environmental Science at Barnard College of Columbia University. She now lives in Berlin, Germany working remotely on environmental law and policy research.

Notes

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