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ENSURING JUSTICE IN TRANSITION

A Gender-Transformative Approach

UNRISD UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Global Initiative for Economic, Social & Cultural Rights

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Contents

List of Acronyms

4CA	Child-Centred Climate Change Adaptation
CAN Europe	Climate Action Network Europe
COP21	21st Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GHG	greenhouse gas
GTNfW	Grassroot Trading Network for Women
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
LDCs	least developed countries
NAF	National Adaptation Fund
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association
UN Women	United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
WEDO	Women's Environment and Development Organization
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

About this report

This report offers a global overview of just transition policy frameworks and an assessment of what is needed in order to ensure that they contribute to greater social justice. Though important progress has been made in advocating for this kind of transition, translating aspirations into concrete policy and programming requires robust analytical tools that can guide implementation at multiple scales. Moreover, as use of just transition language proliferates, and rests heavily on perspectives rooted in the Global North, this research provides grounded examples of what it actually means in the Global South. By drawing on experiences and expertise from the Global South we synthesize and translate key findings into practical insights. We propose a gender-transformative approach to just transition policy and offer a framework to help evaluate and improve existing and future initiatives. The analytical tools elaborated here serve as an overview and guide to help evaluate and develop more socially just and better just transition policies.

Introduction

The climate emergency is an unprecedented global challenge that demands an urgent and comprehensive transformation of our societies. It also reveals deep social inequality. On the one hand, the historic responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions lies predominantly with industrialized nations and their patterns of production and consumption. On the other hand, the adverse impacts of climate change disproportionately affect vulnerable populations in the Global South, particularly women, racialized people, Indigenous communities, and those living in poverty. This asymmetry between responsibility and vulnerability underscores the imperative of integrating equity considerations into climate action. Thus, it is essential to ensure that the response to the climate emergency guarantees social and gender justice rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

The concept of just transition offers a powerful framework to redress existing inequalities and build fair and sustainable societies within planetary boundaries. Born out of the labour movement during the 1970s, the term, just transition, was coined by trade unions and workers in the fossil fuel industry in the United States, who were concerned about the damage that phasing out fossil fuels could have on their jobs and livelihoods (Morena et al. 2018). In recent years, the idea has gained traction among a wide range of stakeholders and has been referenced in key climate change fora and policy documents, including in the preamble of the Paris Agreement.[1] Over time, the concept has evolved beyond a workers' demand to encompass a broad set of rights and other social and environmental justice concerns that will be affected by transition policies.

Today, just transition is a policy framework that advances ecological transformations, focusing on the perspectives of the most marginalized. This concept seeks to repair the harm done to individuals, communities, the

[1] The Paris Agreement was adopted by 196 Parties at COP21 in Paris on 12 December 2015. It entered into force on 4 November 2016.

Photo: FreePik

environment, and future generations. As such, just transition offers a promising roadmap for policy innovation, well positioned to develop eco-social approaches capable of addressing the interlinked challenges of the climate emergency and social inequality. It provides a framework to ensure the full and progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights, while restructuring our societies in order to protect the natural environment.

Despite its uptake beyond union organising, many mainstream approaches to just transition still overlook at least one critical dimension: gender. Without explicitly integrating a gender-transformative perspective, transition policies risk perpetuating or even worsening structural gender inequalities. This report argues that adopting a gender-transformative approach is essential for creating truly just transitions that address the root causes of both environmental degradation and gender inequality. By offering a nuanced analysis of ongoing just transition efforts and drawing on the perspectives and expertise of community members, civil society activists, and researchers, we show how community-led initiatives in the Global South are pioneering approaches that go far beyond a focus solely on formal labour. These initiatives offer valuable insights for developing more comprehensive, equitable approaches to just transition globally.

This brief provides an overview of how gender can be approached in just transition policy to argue that the most promising way to advance gender equality can be achieved by adopting gender-transformative policy and programming with an intersectional lens. On this basis, the brief provides four case studies of grassroots and community-led experiences of gender-just transitions to distil key lessons learned that help identify the central elements of a truly transformational transition.

Just Transition

Evolving Towards a Gender-Just Transformative Approach

The Climate Emergency and the Rise of the Just Transition Concept

Women test a solar cooker in India (2009). Photo by UN Photo (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Caption is taken from the Flickr page of UNDP.

Despite attempts in the last few decades to avert the climate emergency, global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have exponentially increased. In 2023, emissions hit a record high of 57.1 GtCO2e, which represents a 1.3 percent increase from 2022 levels (Hausfather and Friedlingstein 2024). This annual rise in global emissions has steadily grown despite the advancement of low-carbon technologies and the deployment of other critical measures to decarbonize the economy. The consequences are devastating, with climate-related natural resource scarcity and extreme weather events putting the conditions sustaining all life on the planet at risk. Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from undernutrition, malaria, diarrhoea, and heat stress alone (WHO 2023). From wildfires in the United States and droughts in South Africa and Uganda to floods in Pakistan and typhoons in the Philippines, climate-related weather events are already compromising life, critical infrastructure, and the overall sustainability of our societies for present and future generations.

The six largest greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters—China, the United States, India, the European Union, Russia, and Brazil—accounted for 63 percent of total global emissions in 2023 (Hausfather and Friedlingstein 2024). In contrast, the least developed countries (LDCs), a group of 46 nations[2] particularly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks, contributed only three percent of global GHG emissions (UNCTAD 2023). Despite being the least responsible for the climate emergency, the most disproportionately impacted are the populations already facing conditions of structural marginalization in the LDCs. For instance, in Malawi,

[2] Since Bhutan and Sao Tome and Principe are no longer considered LDCs, the list currently only includes 44 countries.

low-income women farmers who account for more than 80 percent of the country's subsistence crop production and rely on the natural rainfall cycles are now facing food insecurity and extreme poverty due to climate change, droughts, heavy rain, and pests (UN Women 2024). This situation highlights the seriousness of the crisis. Humanity is far from being on track to avoid the worst effects of the climate emergency. Those who are least responsible for this crisis, possessing the lowest capacity, resources, and technology to cope, are the ones who are bearing the highest social and environmental costs.

Against this backdrop, most responses aiming to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis have proven insufficient or unfit for purpose. They fail to tackle the root causes of the climate emergency and to address structural inequalities between and within countries. This, in turn, has led to significant gaps in climate finance and fractured global responses that do not offer solutions for people and communities most impacted by the disruptions of the climate system. Moreover, measures deployed to address the climate emergency commonly tend to reproduce abuses and the uneven power imbalances between States, corporations, communities, trade unions, and marginalized groups. Climate and energy policy is often drafted by decision-makers behind closed doors without due regard for the needs and interests of workers and communities affected by the climate emergency.

In this context, just transition—the idea that justice and equality must be an integral part of the shift towards a low-carbon economy—plays a pivotal role in expanding the debate and mobilizing action towards social and environmental justice without prioritizing one over the other. Concerns about the impact of new environmental legislation in the United States on workers in declining industries and the need to facilitate a transition to new forms of employment catalyzed discussions about how to ensure a just transition. Workers in the US are certainly not the only ones to contemplate the importance of jobs *and* the environment, but the term they coined in the 1970s—just transition—has now gained traction globally, beyond its initial proponents' concerns.

Today, the concept of just transition provides a framework that unites critical stakeholders, including trade unions, communities, Indigenous Peoples, civil society, and international organizations, among others. It inspires solutions to the climate emergency that are based on lived experiences and collective decision-making (Morena et al. 2018). The just transition concept has become a way to articulate the demands of workers whose employment and livelihoods are affected by environmental measures, of communities on the frontlines arguing that the transition should not replicate extractive practices and of those aiming to foster systemic socioeconomic change, demanding that big polluters pay for effective climate action. It is notably recognized, albeit with a limited scope, in the preamble of the 2015 Paris Agreement and has been considered in global, national and regional climate and energy policy. In 2015, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted the Guidelines for a Just Transition Towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All (ILO 2015), a set of guidelines that aim to provide a roadmap for job creation and promotion of social protection at scale as countries shift towards zero-carbon economies.

An Opportunity to Advance Gender Equality: A Gender-Just Transition

Behind the Scenes at the United Nations Climate Change Conference UNCCC COP29 Day 1. Baku Stadion, Baku, Azerbaijan. November 2024. Photo by Dean Calma / IAEA (CC BY 2.0). Caption is taken from the Flickr page of AIEA.

Importantly, the growth of the just transition concept has helped shed light on the social dimensions of the shift to a low-carbon economy, but in so doing, we see that not only climate change, but also climate adaptation and mitigation efforts can have negative social impacts. In particular, they tend to ignore the deeply entrenched power imbalances related to gender. For instance, women tend to be overrepresented in the informal and caring sectors, leaving them with fewer opportunities to participate in labour reskilling and retraining programmes (Staab et. al. 2021). Land tenure rights are often held by men, which makes women disproportionately vulnerable to land dispossession by large-scale environmental projects and land use change (Ibid.). Furthermore, annually, more than 3.8 million people—mostly women and children—die due to indoor air pollution resulting from the use of unclean cooking, lighting, and heating systems in households (Ibid.). Due to gender-based discrimination, women and gender non-conforming people also tend to have limited access to social protection systems and public services, which overexposes them to greater health risks and other consequences of the climate emergency. Transition policies risk worsening structural gender inequality if gender issues are not prioritized in the transition to low-carbon economies.

To address these challenges, in 2024, the ILO published a key reference policy guide on Gender, Equality, and Inclusion for a Just Transition in Climate Action (Pozzan and Roman 2024). This tool is directed to states, workers, employers, women's groups, and other stakeholders to provide guidance and policy insights. It provides recommendations for how to consider gender in key policy areas and sectors for the transition, including agriculture and forestry, energy, transport, care, waste management, and the circular economy. While this guide represents a positive step, it primarily focuses on formal labour and adopts an approach that fails to fundamentally question the economic model or address the root causes of gender inequality and its interlinkages with other forms of oppression.

As an alternative, various organizations and groups promote a more ambitious perspective by advocating for a gender-transformative approach to Just Transition.[3] We concur that this more ambitious approach is essential. However, disentangling and treating gender injustice as isolated from other forms of oppression is neither feasible nor strategic. This point has been most famously argued by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who coined the term "intersectionality" and revealed the very distinct ways

Transition policies risk worsening structural gender inequality if gender issues are not prioritized in the transition to low-carbon economies.

[3] See for example, UN Women, WEDO, CAN Europe, among others.

Though advocacy by women's rights and ecofeminist organizations represents a crucial step forward, translating their visions into concrete policy and programming requires robust analytical tools that can guide implementation in different contexts and at multiple scales.

that Black women experience sexism and gender inequality. The idea of intersectionality has since evolved into an even broader analytical approach that helps understand the multitude of ways that different kinds of discrimination and injustice (due to race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, caste, religion, etc.) intersect in specific lived experiences. Here we suggest that gender-transformative climate policies that incorporate an intersectional approach offer the most comprehensive and ambitious tools to simultaneously address environmental degradation, patriarchal systems and the multiple vectors of oppression that gender inequality intersects with. Indeed, "climate change is not just an environmental issue –it is a social crisis within which multiple oppressions intertwine and interact… [And i] ntersectionality offers to untangle this complex web, leading to more nuanced understandings and less exclusionary solutions to the climate crisis" (Mikulewicz et al. 2023: 1281).

Such gender-transformative initiatives for just transition often draw on different strands of ecofeminist theory, which recognize that the oppression of women and gender non-conforming individuals is linked to the patriarchal, colonial and capitalistic structures that also drive the domination and exploitation of nature. Advocates of this approach often promote a deep restructuring of current economic, social, and political systems in order to achieve well-being and gender equality for everyone. The Women's Environment and Development Organization, for instance, recognizes that "feminists have consistently advocated for a worldwide overhaul to dismantle the systems of extraction, exploitation, and oppression affecting both people and the planet" (WEDO 2023: 2). They argue that a "gender just transition—at a global macroeconomic level, including and beyond a vision for an equitable energy transition—is fundamental to this structural transformation" (Ibid.).

A growing number of women's rights and ecofeminist organizations have adopted an intersectional framing of just transition that includes the specific needs and visions of the most historically marginalized, such as Indigenous Peoples, racialized people, persons with disabilities, women and gender non-conforming individuals. For example, Friends of the Earth acknowledges that "grassroots, anti-capitalist, Indigenous, anti-racist and feminist movements must lead the way towards a just and feminist energy transition, disputing practices, and narratives against mainstream energy transition" (Fernandes 2021: 12).

Despite some important existing and ambitious just transition perspectives, many initiatives fail to adequately address gender inequality. This highlights the urgent need for more systemic and comprehensive frameworks that help translate ideas into action. Though advocacy by women's rights and ecofeminist organizations represents a crucial step forward, translating their visions into concrete policy and programming requires robust analytical tools that can guide implementation in different contexts and at multiple scales. To bridge this gap between aspiration and practice, policymakers and stakeholders need clear frameworks to assess existing initiatives, identify areas for improvement, and design interventions that genuinely transform gender relations rather than merely tweaking existing structures to try to accommodate them.

The Gender Integration Continuum

An Analytical Framework to Integrate Gender into Policy Programming and Achieve a Gender-Just Transition

This section introduces tools to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programmes in gender-just transitions. On the one hand, these tools help diagnose and assess how effectively existing policies and projects integrate gender concerns, ranging from discriminatory approaches to truly transformative interventions. On the other hand, the section also presents tools that enable policymakers and stakeholders to develop new policies that incorporate ambitious and transformative measures.

The integration of a gender perspective should take place from start to finish, throughout each program or policy's design, implementation, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluation stages. To assess such incorporation, the *Gender Integration Continuum* is a conceptual framework that helps identify the level of integration of gender concerns into policies and projects (Marcus et al. 2021). The continuum also provides guidance on how to improve policies so that they more effectively address gender inequality and its interconnections with other kinds of oppression (FAO 2024). This diagnostic tool offers the following five distinct categories to help assess how gender concerns have been incorporated into a policy or project:

1 Gender discriminatory policy or programming

reinforces marginalization and inequality of different gender groups. It favours gender stereotypes and social practices. For instance, reskilling and retraining programmes are available only to men and impose conditional cash transfers for women, reinforcing their role as the only care providers at the household level.

2 Gender-blind policy or programming

disregards gender implications and concerns, thus perpetuating the prevailing norms of gender discrimination. These initiatives are often technically available to all, but in practice, do not help people overcome structural gender-based barriers. For instance, the development of a contributory social protection system that does not consider that women (especially racialized women) are overrepresented in the informal sector and often do not have access to these services.

3 Gender-sensitive policy or programming

acknowledges the specific needs of different gender groups without fully integrating gender objectives and specific actions to achieve gender-equal outcomes. For example, a just energy transition programme that seeks to provide energy services to women to tackle their energy poverty, but disregards the differentiated needs of women in new employment opportunities in the renewable energy sector.

4 Gender-responsive policy or programming

seeks to achieve gender-equal outcomes and recognizes the needs of different gender groups. However, it does not adequately tackle the underlying structural conditions of marginalization. For example, a policy that promotes the implementation of gender and human rights assessments before designing a green energy project, while also creating spaces for women and gender-diverse individuals to voice their concerns, still falls short. It fails to eliminate and remove the barriers that gender non-conforming people and women of diverse backgrounds face, hindering their ability to participate effectively and meaningfully.

5 Gender-transformative policy or programming

has a comprehensive and holistic human rights-based approach that tackles the root causes of gender inequality. It critically examines gender roles and practices, tackles structural barriers, and recognizes positive norms that promote equality. Additionally, it encourages the organization of women's and gender non-conforming people's meaningful representation in decision-making processes aligned with human rights. It has the explicit aim of transforming patriarchal systems. Furthermore, this approach includes an intersectional lens that acknowledges the ways that different vectors of oppression intersect in particular contexts and lived experiences, creating distinct conditions of marginalization for different people and communities in the face of the climate emergency. It therefore advocates for the improvement of all women and gender non-conforming people's livelihoods via the full realization of their human rights, transforming the underlying causes of inequality. To this end, gender transformative programming is multi-sectoral and multi-level: promoting increased agency for women and gender non-conforming people, and restructuring power relations and social institutions, at the individual, household, community, organizational, national and global levels (Ibid.). Gender transformative policies systematically incorporate gender impact assessments at every stage of policy development, analyzing how proposed interventions affect different groups and examining whether they challenge or reinforce existing power structures and gender norms. For instance, a transformative gender-just transition policy would seek to recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care, fairly reward and create spaces of representation for paid care workers, and increase resilience and access to necessary natural resources for care systems at the household and community levels (UN Women, cited in Eknor Ackzell 2025). It would be careful not to simply shift care burdens from white women to racialized women. It recognizes diverse knowledges, respecting, for example, the development of policy and programming led by and based on Indigenous cosmovisions. It would provide grants and highly concessional finance to invest in public services and social protection systems, promote individual and collective action by marginalized groups, support women's and other gender groups' efforts to work and hold leadership roles in male-dominated sectors, and foster public and/or collective ownership and management of new renewable energy systems.

To systematically evaluate where just transition frameworks fall within the Gender Integration Continuum, the following table provides key guiding questions organized around three critical policy dimensions. Furthermore, these questions can help identify the necessary changes to reach a gender-transformative approach.
Gender transformative approaches explicitly recognize that gender extends beyond a binary framework. When we refer to 'women,' we aim to encompass women in all their diversity, and acknowledging the limitations of traditional binary categorizations. An important challenge to operationalizing this approach is that much of the available data is collected in binary terms, which we utilize in some parts

Monitoring the restoration of wetlands by communities in El Palomar, December 2023. Photo by Andrés Estefan/UNDP Colombia (CC BY-NC 2.0). Caption taken from the Flickr page of UNDP Climate.

of this report due to the absence of more inclusive datasets. However, we underscore that the term gender is not synonymous with biological sex, and our analysis considers the impact of just transition efforts in key sectors that have been historically shaped by men and for men, often excluding those who do not conform to gender norms. This includes women, non-binary individuals, and men taking on non-traditional roles, such as caregiving. This perspective promotes gender-just transitions through an intersectional lens, recognising how overlapping identities shape experiences within these systems.

As this analytical tool demonstrates, policies that achieve gender-transformative outcomes do so by addressing the root causes of inequality, mobilizing broader constituencies, and creating more sustainable solutions that tackle interconnected and multi-scalar challenges. When just transition frameworks place gender equality at their centre, they can unlock the full potential of communities most affected by climate change, harness diverse knowledge systems, and build the inclusive coalitions essential for the unprecedented scale and speed of transformation required to avert climate breakdown. Far from being an additional burden or competing priority, gender-transformative approaches enhance the effectiveness, durability, and legitimacy of climate action while also delivering fairer and more just outcomes.

Guiding questions for the placement of policies and projects in the Gender Integration Continuum

APPROACH	• Does it incorporate gender equality in its guiding principles, outcomes, or objectives to be pursued? • If so, how is gender equality conceptualized? • Is it focused only on women and girls, or does it encompass other gender groups? • Are women and girls treated as a homogenous category? Does it incorporate an intersectional approach?
OBJECTIVES	• Does the policy or programme aim to address different gender equality concerns? • Does it pursue transformative change of agency, power relations, and social institutions? • Does it foster change across several levels of influence: individual, household, community, organizational, national and/or global? • Does it aim to address barriers faced by women and/or gender non-conforming individuals or groups? • Does it aim to tackle structural inequalities in the care economy?
STRATEGY	• Does it have a clear strategy to achieve gender equality objectives? • Does it incorporate specific interventions? • If so, what are the concrete actions envisaged? • Are these actions the most suitable to pursue the objectives established? • Does it include the implementation of gender impact assessments and gender budgeting? • Does it mainstream gender equality concerns across all stages of programmatic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation? • Does it ensure the effective and meaningful participation of different gender groups, from diverse backgrounds (in terms of race, class, ethnicity, age, geography, religion, caste, etc) in decision-making?

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Table developed by authors based on: Training Manual on Gender and Climate Resilience (UN Women Asia-Pacific et. al. 2021).

Case Studies and Lessons Learned

Promising Practices for Gender-Just Transitions in the Global South

To further advance policy frameworks and attain a transformative approach, initiatives working at the grassroots level to promote gender justice provide important lessons. Community-led initiatives offer particularly valuable lessons, as they often emerge from the lived experiences of those most affected by climate change, adaptation and mitigation. Understanding these elements can help inform gender-transformative policy development for a just transition.

Although the origins of the just transition term emerged out of the US labour movement, the transformative potential of just transition policies will depend on their ability to expand their relevance to constituencies beyond formal workers in the Global North. Indeed, we suggest that some of the most promising practices in the gender-transformative approach to just transition today are found in countries in the Global South. The following examples aim to highlight not only how relevant just transition policy is in these places, but also how they are at the forefront of developing gender-transformative policy. They provide much needed insights for others working to centre social justice concerns in climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. In the places described below, communities face vulnerabilities stemming from long histories of colonialism, extraction, and climate change, yet they have developed strategies to strengthen climate resilience and address the deeply embedded conditions of structural gender inequality. We also offer a short analysis of the ongoing challenges these initiatives face, despite the important advances being made. While there is always room for improvement, the four case studies below highlight grassroots initiatives that address climate concerns, economic and other forms of injustice, and gender inequality. These initiatives, thus, demonstrate that environmental sustainability and intersectional gender justice can—and should—go hand in hand.

Photos from left to right: UN Women/Gaganjit Singh (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0); Abbie Trayler-Smith / Panos Pictures / Department for International Development (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0); Andrés Estefan/UNDP Colombia (CC BY-NC 2.0); Alec Douglas (public domain via Unsplash).

The barefoot solar engineers of Tinginaput, India. Left to right: Talsa Miniaka, Pulka Wadeka, Meenakshi Dewan and Bundei Hidreka. Since the four women have brought electricity to their remote village, they have had artificial light, can power radios and watch television. And they see the potential for more from this clean energy source—such as solar powered cookers. September 2009. Photo by Abbie Trayler-Smith / Panos Pictures / Department for International Development (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Caption is taken from the Flickr page of the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

SEWA's Green Livelihood Campaign: Transforming Lives and Livelihoods in India

As one of the world's largest energy-poor populations, millions of women and girls in India spend hours a day collecting biomass for household use, leading to time poverty and severe health risks. The burden of this unpaid labour limits their time for education, income generation, and participation in community decision-making. Rural women in India remain largely excluded from energy access decisions and green job markets.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)'s Green Livelihood Campaign, launched in 2009, supports rural women by providing affordable clean energy solutions like cookstoves, solar panels, and biogas, reducing household energy costs by 30–40 percent (SEWA 2022: 53). Partnering with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and local governments, among others, the program targets salt farmers, agricultural workers, and young women seeking technical skills. They established India's first women-owned solar park in Naradi village, which provides year-round income.

In 2022, under the Green Livelihood Campaign, SEWA launched the innovative *Surya* programme in collaboration with UNEP and Renew Power, focusing on Santalpur Taluka in Patan district. People in this area mainly work in salt production, relying on diesel pumps, which, over the years, have resulted in higher costs and environmental damage. Under programmes like *Surya*, women were trained in solar technology, creating economic opportunities and building social safety nets. Beyond the initial development of clean cookstoves

and solar panels, SEWA established a comprehensive ecosystem for renewable energy adoption. They developed a woman-led supply chain, with members trained not only in installation but also in maintenance and repair of solar equipment. The program created tiered training opportunities from basic technical literacy to advanced certification. Over 150 women have received advanced technical certifications, enabling them to secure higher-paying positions in Gujarat's growing renewable energy sector.

This initiative has created impacts beyond energy access. In addition to the 2.7 MW of electricity generated from the Naradi village solar park, this project is providing consistent income for 300 women shareholders. Time spent collecting fuel was also reduced by 70 percent, freeing approximately 10-15 hours per week for women.

Reflecting on the remaining challenges, Rehanaben Riyawala, the CEO of Grassroot Trading Network for Women (GTNfW), a SEWA partner, highlights the particular challenge of ensuring a gender-just transition for poor women workers:

> [p]oor women workers are the most adaptable to climate risk, yet are often not recognised because of cultural and structural barriers. Our members are regularly piloting new affordable technologies and working towards solutions, but do not have access to financing or technologies or safety nets that are essential to help build resilience to climate change. We need to recognize those at the bottom of the pyramid as a part of the solution, including waste recyclers and trash pickers (McPherson 2024).

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Participants ask questions during a training. Energy conservator Lakshmiben Dusurathbhai Thakar trains women about compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) and its benefits suing a Wattmeter-machine. June 2012. Photo by Abbie UN Women/Gaganjit Singh Chandok (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Caption is taken from the Flickr page of UN Women Asia and the Pacific.

Child-Centred Climate Change Adaptation (4CA) in Fiji

Mangrove planting in Fiji led by the Pacific Youth Climate Change Network with students from a nearing school. October 2010. Photo by Vinaka Kameli (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). Caption taken from the Flickr page of 350.org.

Moving from the clean energy context in India to climate adaptation in the Pacific Islands, we see how gender-transformative approaches can be adapted to different environmental challenges and cultural contexts. The 4CA Programme (2011–2014) in Nasau village, Fiji, addressed climate threats like cyclones and flooding through a collaborative, inclusive approach (Winterford et. al. 2018). Nasau village, located in Fiji's interior highlands of Viti Levu, is highly vulnerable to extreme weather events and climate change due to its remote location and reliance on subsistence agriculture. Moreover, traditional gender roles in Fijian villages typically exclude women from formal decision-making processes. Women's representation in local governance structures stood at less than 10 percent prior to the 4CA intervention, despite women bearing primarily responsibility for household food security, water collection, and childcare.

Led by Plan International Australia and Partners in Community Development, with funding from the New Zealand Government and support from local partners as community engagement facilitators, the programme focused on empowering women and children in decision-making. The programme set quotas for women on committees and created inclusive forums. Beyond simply setting quotas, the programme identified village committees where dedicated spaces for women's leadership could be created. A parallel women's advisory council was established with direct input into the primary village decision-making body, and a youth climate council gave children and young people formal representation. The programme is also combining scientific and traditional knowledge to implement solutions like mangrove planting, climate-resilient crop introduction, and an evacuation centre (Ibid.). The traditional ecological knowledge about weather patterns, crops, and disaster management was documented through intergenerational storytelling sessions. This knowledge was then combined with scientific climate projections to develop locally appropriate strategies.

The outcomes were significant and multidimensional. Women gained

Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI) and Partners In Community Development (PCDF) through its Child-Centred Climate Change Adaptation (4CA) Project celebrate International Day for Disaster Reduction (IDDR) in 2013 with children from various Disability schools in Fiji, Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons and the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). Photo by Amit Kumar (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Caption is taken from the Flickr page of by UN DRR.

increased confidence and decision-making authority, while men began publicly advocating for greater female involvement in community governance. Moreover, children became effective climate change advocates, creating intergenerational knowledge transfer systems that ensure sustainability. The establishment of official positions for women and youth in governance structures helped institutionalize their participation, transforming what had previously been informal consultation practices into structured roles with decision making authority.

It is clear that this programme made important advances in increasing women and children's agency and power in decision making at the community level. The quota system has helped to shift social norms and institutions. What remains challenging over the long term is ensuring that all women and children, regardless of economic and/or social background, have the time/capacity to take advantage of those expanding opportunities. Factors that can limit this capacity include care work burdens that women often disproportionately carry; limited time due to informal and formal labour felt more intensely by poor women; or social exclusion that may hinder access to information. Sustaining women's and youth leadership requires strong policy integration and investment. As climate disasters intensify, adaptation efforts must shift from short-term preparedness to systemic support such as public care infrastructure, resilient housing, and gender-budgeting (CARE International 2020).

The establishment of official positions for women and youth in governance structures helped institutionalize their participation, transforming what had previously been informal consultation practices into structured roles with decision making authority.

COSATU's Just Transition Toolkit in South Africa

WFTU and COSATU march in Durban, South Africa. October 2016. Photo by Brad Sigal (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Shifting from community-based adaptation to labour policy and advocacy, the following case study examines how unions in South Africa have integrated gender concerns into broader just transition frameworks. South Africa's high dependence on coal and entrenched social and racial inequalities make the energy transition particularly fraught. The country relies on coal for approximately 85 percent of its electricity generation, with the coal sector employing around 90,000 workers directly and supporting an estimated 300,000 additional indirect jobs. Women, particularly in sectors like mining and agriculture, face exclusion from formal employment and union leadership. In that context, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has become one of the first unions to develop a Just Transition Blueprint, addressing the economic and social impacts of the transition on workers (COSATU 2024).

COSATU's blueprint emphasized the need for strong social dialogue, decent work, and support for sectors that would be highly affected by the shift from fossil fuels. COSATU advocated and operated at multiple levels, including global, national, and regional levels. Partnering with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the South African Government, COSATU's stakeholders involved women union members, particularly from sectors like mining, agriculture, and transport, shop stewards, educators, organizers and various COSATU affiliate unions across sectors. Although these sectors are unionized, many women in these industries remain in informal roles in seasonal, contract, or artisanal work that fall outside collective bargaining protections. Their initiatives targeted women workers in male-dominated sectors, women in unpaid care work, and union educators and organizers who need gender-focused just transition tools as beneficiaries.

COSATU developed a toolkit to help integrate gender equity into collective bargaining, workplace strategies, and policy dialogue (COSATU

2022). The toolkit outlines strategies for promoting democratic, public ownership models in renewable energy development, with specific mechanisms for ensuring women's representation in the governance structure. The toolkit also includes detailed gender impact assessments for key sectors in South Africa's economy, including mining, agriculture, transport, energy, and manufacturing. Each assessment maps the current gender distribution in formal and informal roles, anticipated impacts of decarbonization, and specific opportunities for gender-transformative interventions.

COSATU's approach goes beyond simply focusing on women and incorporates an intersectional lens that involves diverse groups. In their advocacy and organizing work, they "make use of available data to highlight implications of inaction on affected communities by characterising the vulnerabilities of the locality by race, gender, income levels, settlement type, household size, employment status, education level, grant dependency, etc." (COSATU 2022: 106). COSATU integrates an intersectional lens in its organizing efforts, recognising how race, class, gender, and geography combine to deepen structural inequality. Their approach specifically accounts for the compounded vulnerabilities faced by Black women, low-income workers, and those in informal settlements, groups that have historically been excluded from formal labour protections and union leadership. This is reflected in their gender impact assessments, which map disparities across race, income, education, and employment status to inform more inclusive climate and labour policies. The initiative advances key dimensions of gender-transformative change by promoting women's agency through participatory policy development, shifting power dynamics within union structures, and challenging institutional norms that have historically excluded gender perspectives in climate and labour strategies.

COSATU's work towards a gender-just transition builds on years of work fighting to increase gender justice within the Union and for women workers. Their long history reveals the challenge of moving from policy to practice. According to a Solidarity Centre study on this issue, "despite the steps South African union leaders have taken to address gender inequality, trade union leadership remains predominantly male, women are not supported to aspire to high leadership positions and every-day gendered practices have entrenched male domination" (Benjamin 2021: 4). Indeed, for gender-transformative policy to be effective, it must encourage change among people of all genders. Ultimately, there is a need for "male leaders who are willing to challenge their own patriarchal practices and work as role models in challenging broader patriarchal cultures" (Ibid.: 13).

While deep structural and social transformation is a long-term project, COSATU's efforts have already made important impacts. Their approach successfully influenced the inclusion of gender equity provisions in South Africa's National Just Transition Framework. Over 2,000 union representatives were also trained in gender-just transition principles, while collective bargaining agreements with gender-specific transition provisions now cover approximately 150,000 workers. Overall, COSATU's work demonstrates how just transition efforts can be a vehicle for advancing gender justice when grounded in inclusive, democratic, and context-responsive union action.

COSATU integrates an intersectional lens in its organizing efforts, recognising how race, class, gender, and geography combine to deepen structural inequality.

Women of the ASOMUPROPAL association, leaders and representatives of the community. El Palomar village, Majagual, La Mojana, December 2023. Photo by Andrés Estefan/UNDP Colombia (CC BY-NC 2.0). Caption taken from the Flickr page of UNDP Climate.

The La Mojana Project in Colombia

While COSATU demonstrates the importance of transforming gender relations in labour movements, the La Mojana project in Colombia illustrates how similar principles can be applied to ecosystem restoration and water management. The La Mojana project is a climate-resilient initiative financed by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) to support the Government of Colombia. Its goal is to enhance integrated water resource management practices in La Mojana, one of the poorest and most climate-vulnerable regions in the country. The region functions as a natural water regulation system for Colombia's Caribbean watershed, but faces severe climate vulnerability. Annual flooding has increased in frequency and severity, with major flood events in 2010-2011 and 2021 displacing over 200,000 people. The social context in the region is complex, with significant populations of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities who, despite marginalization, have developed traditional water management practices over centuries. However, these communities face ongoing displacement pressures from both climate impacts and land conflicts following Colombia's decades-long armed conflict.

The project involves collaboration among several institutional partners, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the GCF, the National Adaptation Fund (NAF), the Colombian Ministry of Environment and Sustainable

Development, various research agencies, and local environmental authorities (UNDP 2017). Stakeholders also include diverse parties from the government, local organizations and health centres. About 40,000 hectares of wetlands have been restored using both traditional ecological knowledge and modern hydrological science. Women made up 65 percent of community members employed in restoration activities. Overall, 45 percent of the 203,918 direct beneficiaries are women, while indirect beneficiaries also include rural communities facing water-related vulnerabilities, female-headed households, and Indigenous communities. The project emphasizes restoring wetland ecosystems, adapting livelihoods to seasonal water variations, and empowering vulnerable communities and local authorities to manage climate risks. It facilitated the creation of inclusive water management committees in 11 municipalities, with mandated gender parity in leadership positions. These committees have formal authority in regional water allocation decisions and infrastructure planning. The climate-adaptive agricultural techniques developed by the project, including floating gardens during flood seasons and drought-resistant crop varieties during dry periods, are aimed at accommodating women's multiple roles in household and agricultural production. It created employment opportunities for women in restoration and agricultural adaptation activities, while also increasing their influence in local planning and decision-making.[4] Through the formation of gender-balanced water committees, local governance structures created to manage water systems in the La Mojana region, with required female representation of at least 40 percent, and participatory restoration planning, the project ensured that women, particularly those from rural and Indigenous communities, such as the Zenú, helped shape project design and delivery (UNDP 2017). Guided by a gender-transformative approach, the project goes beyond simply integrating women's participation, but it aims to shift entrenched gender roles, address structural inequalities in access to land and decision-making spaces, and promote the leadership of marginalized groups in climate governance.

Additionally, the rapid advance of climate change poses serious challenges to restoration and conservation work in La Mojana. Increasingly frequent extreme weather events, coupled with unpredictable precipitation patterns, make sustaining life in the region difficult. While the project has demonstrated the value of strong community participation with a gender-balanced approach in watershed management, it also reveals the need for scaling up coordinated gender-just transition global efforts to curb the disastrous effects of the climate emergency.

Drawing from these in-depth case studies, we synthesize key findings through a comparative framework. While the narrative highlights each initiative's local context and implementation strategies, the following table summarizes their achievements across six criteria central to a gender-transformative just transition. These include the redistribution of benefits, employment creation, decision-making power, recognition of unpaid care work, and the application of an intersectional approach. This analytical framework helps distil the specific ways in which each initiative addresses systematic inequalities while advancing climate and energy goals. It also allows us to evaluate how each project aligns with the pillars of gender-transformative

Guided by a gender-transformative approach, the project goes beyond simply integrating women's participation, but it aims to shift entrenched gender roles, address structural inequalities in access to land and decision-making spaces, and promote the leadership of marginalized groups in climate governance.

[4] It is worth mentioning that a further step for gender transformative programmes should be aiming to attain progress towards restructuring gender roles within households, so that such water and food management tasks are not seen as women's work.

Women community leaders maintaining the community nursery. El Palomar, Magagual, La Mojana, Colombia. Photo by Andrés Estefan/ UNDP Colombia (CC BY-NC 2.0). Caption taken from the Flickr page of UNDP Climate.

programming as outlined earlier in this report. This framework helps to identify the common patterns and distinctive approaches across our case studies. While all initiatives demonstrate some elements of gender transformation, they vary in their emphasis and depth across these dimensions. The SEWA case, for example, shows particular strength in creating employment pathways and redistributing economic benefits, while COSATU excels in embedding intersectionality in policy advocacy by explicitly addressing how race, class, gender, and labour precarity intersect to shape worker vulnerability, which guides its strategies for union organising and climate justice. The La Mojana project shows how ecosystem restoration can also reduce care work burdens, and the 4CA initiative in Fiji illustrates how governance reforms can shift decision-making power.

By examining these criteria across different geographies and intervention types, the chart emphasizes that gender-just transitions require attention to both tangible resources (e.g., energy and income) *and* structural power (e.g., participation in decision-making or recognition and redistribution of care work). It also shows that transformative outcomes are most likely when programs are tailored to local needs, inclusive of historically marginalized voices, and intentionally designed to challenge gender norms.

The comparative analysis across these four case studies shows that gender transformative just transitions require multidimensional approaches that simultaneously address economic, governance, and social dimensions. While each initiative emerges from a unique local context, successful cases consistently combine economic redistribution with governance reform and explicit attention to care work. This analysis also shows how reducing care burdens tends to be more feasible than redistributing care work and questioning gender roles. Transformation requires comprehensive strategies to address

Transformative outcomes are most likely when programs are tailored to local needs, inclusive of historically marginalized voices, and intentionally designed to challenge gender norms.

complex social and structural barriers while centring the leadership of those most affected by both climate change and gender inequality. No single intervention alone achieves gender transformation. The most successful initiatives work simultaneously across multiple dimensions, addressing economic redistribution, governance reform, and social norm change. SEWA's success, for instance, stems not just from providing clean energy technology but from creating women-led supply chains, establishing cooperative ownership models, and building women's technical expertise. Similarly, the 4CA program in Fiji combined governance reforms with knowledge integration and infrastructure development.

These cases challenge the assumption that economic transition and social transformation are competing priorities that must be pitted against each other. Instead, they demonstrate how gender-transformative approaches can accelerate just transitions by mobilising broader constituencies, creating more sustainable solutions, and addressing root causes rather than symptoms. When women become energy entrepreneurs, when Indigenous knowledge guides ecosystem restoration, and when unions embrace intersectional organising, the resulting transitions are both more equitable and more effective at achieving climate goals. This suggests that gender transformation should be viewed not as one consideration among many in just transition planning, but as a strategic approach that enhances the effectiveness, sustainability, and equity of climate action, while providing valuable insights for scaling successful community-led innovations to broader policy frameworks.

It is also necessary to note that the cases show that there is still a long way ahead. While these reflect significant progress toward women's empowerment and gender-transformative practices, they fail to significantly address the specific experiences and realities of gender non-conforming people. Most initiatives operate within a binary understanding of gender, limiting their inclusivity. Future just transition strategies should seek to better reflect the full spectrum of gender diversity by adopting more inclusive data practices, participation mechanisms, and leadership pathways that ensure equitable outcomes for all.

Solar engineering students from Malawi take a training in India. March 2012. Photo by UN Women/ Gaganjit Singh (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

Criteria	Community-led Experience			
	SEWA (India)	**4CA (Fiji)**	**COSATU (South Africa)**	**La Mojana (Colombia)**
Redistribution of Benefits Ensuring equitable access to resources, income, and services among gender groups (Pozzan and Roman 2024).	Distributed solar tech and clean energy, lowering energy costs and enabling women's ownership of infrastructure.	Ensured that vulnerable groups benefited from adaptation investments, like climate-resilient crops and evacuation centres.	Advocated for economic justice by embedding gender into worker protections and transition planning.	While La Mojana remains one of the country's poorest regions, the project improved access to clean water and climate-resilient infrastructure for rural women and Indigenous communities.
Creation of Employment Opportunities Generating decent, sustainable, and accessible jobs for women and gender-diverse individuals (UN Women Asia-Pacific et. al. 2021).	Created solar entrepreneurship pathways and vocational training for women.	Women were employed to carry out resilience-building activities, including constructing and maintaining disaster-resilient infrastructure, planting mangroves, and building community facilities.	Enabled union women in male-dominated sectors (e.g., mining) to participate in the green economy dialogue.	Introduced climate-resilient agriculture and water-tech training for community-based employment
Redistribution of Decision-Making Power Increasing women's and marginalized groups' influence in planning, implementation, and governance (Pozzan and Roman 2024).	Women shaped renewable energy deployment and ownership, including India's first women-owned solar park.	Formal quotas for women and children in village committees changed governance norms.	Though creating gender parity among union leadership remains challenging, women in the union contributed to the national and international just transition policy dialogue.	Community-driven water governance ensured Indigenous women and Afro-Colombian communities influenced project design and delivery.

Criteria	Community-led Experience			
	SEWA (India)	**4CA (Fiji)**	**COSATU (South Africa)**	**La Mojana (Colombia)**
Recognition of Informal/ Unpaid Care Work Valuing and reducing the burden of unpaid care and domestic work traditionally done by women (Ibid.).	Improved access to clean energy reduced time spent on fuel collection and indoor tasks.	Alleviated caregiving stress by reducing disaster vulnerability and improving local services (e.g., shelters, crops).	Highlighted unpaid labour in climate discourse and advocated for public care infrastructure.	Reduced care burden by improving water systems and investing in rural women's livelihoods.
Intersectional Approach Designing programs that acknowledge overlapping identities and forms of systemic oppression (Ibid.).	Focused on informal sector[5] women across caste, region, and occupation.	Integrated gender and age dimensions, promoting leadership among women and children.	Highlighted the disproportionate and uneven impacts of inaction according to race, gender and class. Focused particularly on Black and low-income women in informal or precarious employment, groups often excluded from formal labour protections, union representation, and climate policy influence.	Prioritized Indigenous communities, traditional ecosystem management practices and female-headed households through tailored implementation.

[5] While informal work may not be an identity category in the traditional sense, it functions as a significant factor of marginalization that intersects with and compounds other forms of exclusion. Working in the informal sector creates distinct conditions of vulnerability—including lack of legal protections, social security, and collective bargaining rights—that shape individuals' lived experiences and access to resources. Informality often results from and reinforces other marginalized identities, particularly socioeconomic background, that are overrepresented in informal work due to structural barriers in formal employment.

Conclusion

The climate emergency demands nothing short of a fundamental transformation of our societies. In that sense, it is both an existential threat and a profound opportunity to reimagine and rebuild our societies in more equitable, sustainable, and just ways. The concept of a just transition has the potential to guide that process. What began in the labour movement as a call to protect workers has evolved into a broader, more inclusive framework for social transformation. Yet, the full potential of just transition will remain unrealized as long as gender inequality is treated as secondary rather than central to climate action.

The concept of just transition must necessarily incorporate a gender perspective, as the climate emergency is not gender-neutral in its impacts. It intensifies pre-existing social, economic, and political inequalities, and disproportionately impacts women, girls and non-binary individuals, particularly those facing intersecting forms of marginalization. At the same time, those groups are simultaneously excluded from decision-making processes related to climate action. Thus, integrating a gender perspective into climate policy is essential for achieving a truly just transition.

Rainwater harvesting systems are helping to address long-term water supply problems in La Mojana. December 2023. Photo by Andrés Estefan/UNDP Colombia (CC BY-NC 2.0). Caption taken from the Flickr page of UNDP Climate.

Placing gender equality at the centre of just transition frameworks will not only contribute to delivering on its commitment to justice, but can also help secure broader support for the far-reaching and rapid structural transformations needed to stabilize the climate and avert the worst consequences of the crisis. Thus, incorporating a gender perspective into climate action is not only just, but strategic.

A gender-transformative just transition does not merely seek to include women or mitigate gender-specific harms; it actively works to transform the structures that create and sustain inequality. Only policies that challenge and dismantle patriarchal norms, redistribute power, and reshape social institutions across all spheres—household, community, organizational, national and global—can truly be called transformative. This means recognising, reducing, redistributing, rewarding and representing care work, enabling gender-diverse leadership in climate governance, securing land and resource rights for women and marginalized groups, and building resilient economies based on solidarity, sustainability, and justice. Going forward, truly gender transformative just transition approaches must take deliberate steps to recognize diverse gender identities and expressions, ensuring that climate and labour transitions are inclusive of all people.

The case studies presented in this report demonstrate that such transformation is already underway. These initiatives did not treat gender as peripheral. Instead, they were established with the aim of dismantling inequality at its core. Furthermore, the projects were designed in a way that responded directly to lived experiences and local realities of the communities involved. Crucially, these initiatives show the power of advancing gender justice and climate resilience together. Not only is it possible, but it also reinforces and strengthens the value of the achievements gained. By centring gender justice in climate action, we can ensure that the transition to sustainability is effective, just and equitable.

The climate emergency demands nothing short of a fundamental transformation of our societies. In that sense, it is both an existential threat and a profound opportunity to reimagine and rebuild our societies in more equitable, sustainable, and just ways.

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ENSURING JUSTICE IN TRANSITION

A Gender-Transformative Approach

This report offers a global overview of just transition policy frameworks and an assessment of what is needed in order to ensure that they contribute to greater social justice. Though important progress has been made in advocating for this kind of transition, translating aspirations into concrete policy and programming requires robust analytical tools that can guide implementation at multiple scales. Moreover, as use of just transition language proliferates, and rests heavily on perspectives rooted in the Global North, this research provides grounded examples of what it actually means in the Global South. By drawing on experiences and expertise from the Global South we synthesize and translate key findings into practical insights. We propose a gender-transformative approach to just transition policy and offer a framework to help evaluate and improve existing and future initiatives. The analytical tools elaborated here serve as an overview and guide to help evaluate and develop more socially just and better just transition policies.

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