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Research Report

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Advancing Gender Equality in Climate Action through NDC 3.0: Insights from the LDCs

Aparajita Banerjee

Summary

Research suggests that the impacts of climate change are felt more acutely by women than men, given their specific socioeconomic roles. It is crucial to recognise the differentiated impacts of climate change on women and the importance of their inclusion in mitigation and adaptation policies, where their voices are often unheard and their concerns remain unaddressed. As international development assistance constricts, crucial lifelines on which many projects that address gender equality rely are disappearing. Winding down such projects can also jeopardise the fragile progress made to address the structural socioeconomic conditions that create gender inequality.

Increased gender mainstreaming in national climate plans under the Paris Agreement, for example, the nationally determined contributions (NDCs), can be one way to effectively address gender inequality in climate action. Countries can develop specific climate change mitigation and adaptation plans to address gender inequality. As a new set of updated NDCs will be submitted in 2025 by the countries committed to the Paris Agreement, it is an opportune time to enhance gender mainstreaming in the next round of NDCs (NDC 3.0) based on concrete policies and actions.

This policy brief explores how gender was addressed in the previous round of NDCs (NDC 2.0) of the least developed countries (LDCs) with high gender inequality. A content analysis was conducted to explore how different gendered policy approaches were mentioned in NDC 2.0 of the LDCs. Based on the findings, this policy brief provides key policy insights for better gender mainstreaming in the next round of NDCs.

Key policy insights:

- Gender mainstreaming needs to be integrated at all policy-making stages and within society, not as an add-on as it is in many NDCs.
- Women in LDCs, particularly those at greater risk of climate disasters, should be prioritised, reaching the farthest away and the most affected first in any international support for climate action projects.
- Gender mainstreaming in climate change mitigation would be essential to creating opportunities for all genders to participate in the technological transformation to a low-carbon society that pursues gender transformative changes.
- Projects with gender transformative plans take time and require long-term consistent funding, and greater focus is needed to choose the right projects to address structural inequalities.
- Research is required to develop evidence-based solutions, and often LDCs lack research funds for long-term studies. Research funding support from developed countries can help LDCs to improve research in LDCs and produce evidence to inform policy action.
- Gender-disaggregated data needs to be collected and used to design, evaluate, implement and fund targeted transformative policies to tackle gender inequality.

Introduction

While climate change is one of the biggest challenges faced by humanity in the 21st century, recent global events have shifted the spotlight away from it. New threats are emerging to dismantle some of the fragile progress in mitigating or adapting to global climate change. The future of trillions of dollars' worth of climate finance required by developing nations for climate change mitigation and adaptation (hereafter climate action) is unknown, especially in light of the recent freeze on foreign aid by developed countries like the United States, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Such funding freezes would affect impactful actions required to mitigate or adapt to climate change, especially in the LDCs, some of which are also most vulnerable to harmful climate impacts.

Similarly, gender equality is also backsliding around the world due to the rising shifts towards anti-gender ideology, even in liberal democracies. Increasingly, scholars and activists playing critical roles in upholding gender equality are at risk, threatened or their operative spaces are shrinking (Kassa & Sarikakis, 2022). Such pushbacks are increasing even when grim statistics continue to emerge, like in the World Bank's recent poverty assessment report, which estimates that around 350 million women and girls live in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2024).

The impact of climate change is felt differently by different genders. For example, women experience the effects of climate change differently than men due to various structural challenges arising from history, culture, politics and socio-economic factors (Box 1). Yet, women's voices often remain unheard in expert-driven technical climate solutions that frequently fail to address their specific challenges (MacGregor, 2010). Upending existing structural challenges is expensive, and the funding sources are limited. With uncertainties plaguing the future of climate action, it is imperative to explore further how the money spent on climate action can create multiple positive spillovers, such as attaining gender equality. Such positive spillovers are

Box 1: Gender-inequality complicates climate change mitigation and adaptation

Resource scarcity and gendered burden: Climate change can lead to scarcity of the resources that women spend more time and effort securing, like water, food, fodder and fuel; power imbalances within families make women less mobile than men who migrate to urban centres; women are left with the burden of care work, especially after extreme climate events, limiting their livelihood options; immobility also increases their risks of dying from natural disasters.

Livelihood risks: Women make up a considerable portion of the agricultural workforce and work under heatwaves and other weather extremes; resource depletion further threatens both their income and well-being.

Mitigation actions are male-centric: Often, mitigation actions, from new technologies to urban planning, are designed for men and overlook the specific needs of women, like in clean cooking, energy efficient technologies or urban public transport planning for women balancing care work and a career. Women are also often excluded from climate projects where men become decision makers, executors or labourers.

Policy-induced inequality: Government policies on land, credit, irrigation and capacity-building activities often reinforce gendered vulnerabilities by providing women less access; climate policies are often gender insensitive as they are mostly designed by men and for men with women's knowledge and experience under- or unrecognised in the policy design.

Knowledge holders and knowledge users: Women often hold local knowledge that is informally passed from one generation to the next and play a critical role in place-based autonomous climate adaptation and sustainable agriculture that produces less greenhouse gas emissions

Women are all different: Not all women are the same, and the effects of climate change aggravate with intersectionalities of race, class, caste, ethnicity and geographic location.

Note: This is a non-exhaustive list of existing research findings on a range of challenges women face due to climate change, specifically in marginalised communities in developing countries.

critical so that climate actions can address existing social inequalities while not creating new ones. Climate action needs to be designed and implemented in a manner that does not further exacerbate social inequalities. The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report also reiterates that structural challenges marginalising women can be addressed through well-designed policies and plans at different governance levels (IPCC, 2023).

This policy brief explores the treatment of gender inequality in NDC 2.0, particularly in countries with high gender inequality. To achieve this, a content analysis was conducted of all the activities outlined in the NDC 2.0 submissions. The gender-related activities of the LDCs were then selected for further content analysis and coded using their gendered policy approach (explained later in the brief in Box 2). This analysis forms the basis for key recommendations on how to better integrate gender equality into climate action. These suggestions have the potential to influence NDC 3.0, which is currently being prepared for submission in 2025, and to guide international development cooperation towards achieving the dual outcomes of climate action and gender equality in project design.

Why is gender equality important in climate action?

The social norms that dictate specific roles and responsibilities for each gender influence how men and women experience climate change and manage its impacts (Rao et al., 2019). A lack of gender equality results in some groups, particularly men, having greater access to information, resources, education and decision-making power than others. In contrast, women often possess unique skills and knowledge that can aid in adapting to or mitigating the effects of climate change. Their distinct perspectives can contribute positively to energy efficiency, addressing energy poverty and adopting sustainable technologies.

It is vital to understand that promoting greater gender equality is not merely a matter of social justice; it is essential for effective climate action (Bell, 2016). For instance, women utilise energy differently, particularly in household chores, and their insights can play a crucial role in enhancing energy efficiency. However, entrenched power imbalances between genders, often institutionalised, lead to poorly designed climate policies that leave women at a disadvantage because of the socially constructed roles they fulfill.

While gender equality plays a critical role in addressing climate change, mention of gender equality has been relatively late in the climate change debate. There is no explicit reference to gender in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or the Kyoto Protocol. In 2014, the Lima Work Programme on Gender was adopted by COP 20, which became the precursor of gender-specific language and activities becoming a part of climate change discussions. Consequently, gender equality was mentioned in the preamble of the Paris Agreement adopted in 2015 and continues to be explored by the UNFCCC under the Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender, which was recently extended for another 10 years in COP 29.

Highlighting gender in the preamble of the Paris Agreement is crucial for tackling gender inequality in the context of climate change. As the foundation of international efforts towards climate action, the Paris Agreement requires each participating country to submit updated NDCs every five years. These NDCs outline each country's climate mitigation and adaptation goals and are essential indicators of their commitment to gender equality in climate action. They also provide important insights into the political will of countries to acknowledge the gender-differentiated effects of climate change. Therefore, each NDC serves as a valuable opportunity to understand how countries pursue climate actions and address gender inequality through effective climate solutions.

Why focus on LDCs?

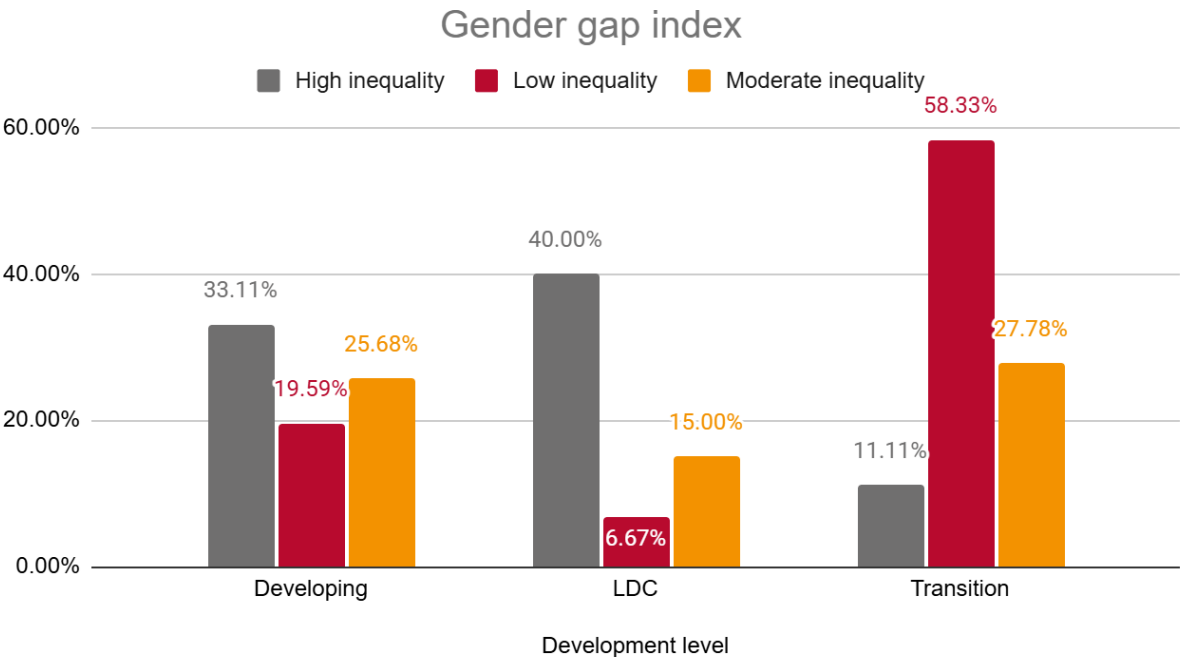
Countries differ significantly in their levels of gender inequality. The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI), developed by the World Economic Forum in 2006, recently published its rankings on gender inequality (WEF, 2024). This index groups 146 countries by their levels of inequality: low, medium and high. Each year, these rankings are updated based on available data across four dimensions: economic opportunities, education, health and political leadership. An index score of 1 indicates full parity between women and men; as the score decreases, the gender gap widens, signifying increased gender inequality.

Figure 1 illustrates that developing countries and LDCs generally experience high to moderate gender inequality. In contrast, transition countries are making significant progress in reducing their gender gaps. It is important to note that not all countries within the developing category face the same level of gender disparities. According

to Figure 1, approximately 40 per cent of reported LDCs and 33 per cent of developing countries have high gender inequality. Addressing poverty and other developmental challenges is a pressing priority for LDCs, which often struggle to invest in climate action (Füssel, 2010). However, it is important to recognise that many LDCs are among the most vulnerable to climate change (Füssel, 2010). By prioritising gender equality in climate initiatives, these countries can unlock transformative benefits that significantly improve various human development indicators.

As LDCs prepare their NDC 3.0, this presents an ideal opportunity to emphasise gender equality in climate action to ensure that developmental co-benefits are achieved. Countries such as Chad, Ethiopia and Somalia, which are severely impacted by climate change, can specifically identify areas in their NDC 3.0 where targeted development assistance can create multiple benefits.

Figure 1: Gender and economic development



Source: WEF (2024) and author's own analysis

Gender mainstreaming: what does it entail?

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy that was endorsed at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. According to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC, 1997), it involves assessing the effects of any plan – whether legislation or programmes – on both women and men at all levels. The goal of this approach is to ensure that the concerns and experiences of both genders are considered and evaluated, promoting gender equality.

Integrating gender considerations at every stage of climate policy development is a fundamental principle of the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan, adopted in 2017. Although countries have responded by incorporating gender mainstreaming into their National Adaptation Plans (Dazé & Hunter, 2024), our analysis found that less than half of these plans mentioned gender in their NDCs. When gender is mentioned in the NDCs, it is often treated as a secondary concern, focussing on specific issues like microfinance, health programmes or agriculture. However, a more comprehensive approach to gender in NDCs is needed, one that addresses deeper structural inequalities and considers gender as a fundamental aspect of climate policy, not just a secondary concern.

While gender mainstreaming is frequently criticised for its limitations in achieving true gender equality, it remains vital to acknowledge and address the differential impacts of climate change on men and women, as well as their unique contributions to climate action.

The loose integration of gender mainstreaming in NDCs often results from a lack of understanding of the process. Gender mainstreaming should encourage governments and organisations to move beyond viewing gender inequality solely as a women's issue. Instead, it should address the deep-rooted economic, social and cultural biases that disadvantage women (Alston, 2014).

Box 2: Different gendered policy approaches

Ambiguous policies mention gender as a commitment in the NDCs but are vague and lack any concrete implementable measures. In other cases, women and youth are often grouped together in climate actions even though their specific concerns can be different and varied.

Gender-neutral policies acknowledge gender differences but work within existing roles. For example, transportation vouchers may be equally distributed but fail to address barriers like caregiving responsibilities that limit women's participation.

Gender-specific policies recognise gender differences and address women's immediate needs but often as add-ons rather than systemic changes. They focus on women's vulnerability rather than structural inequalities.

Gender-sensitive policies recognise gender differences and aim to reduce inequalities, but they are often only implemented within programme design. They view women as virtuous contributors to climate adaptation due to their specialised knowledge. While they promote gender analysis, leadership, and inclusion, they fail to challenge deep-rooted social norms. This results in institutional rigidity and limits women's impact in decision making.

Gender-transformative policies aim to reshape gender roles and power structures, viewing women as agents of change. They address cultural norms and ingrained roles rather than just alleviating symptoms. This leads to policies that integrate gender experts in ministries, monitoring gender outcomes, and using gender-sensitive data to drive policy reforms. This ensures women's active participation in decision making.

When gender mainstreaming is superficial and fails to tackle the underlying issues of gender inequality, it can lead to women being perceived only as mothers and caregivers. This limited perception contributes to a gendered division of labour, restricted access to decision-making processes, unequal distribution of resources and inadequate programme implementation, all of which may exacerbate the effects of climate change on women (Alston, 2014).

Conversely, not fully acknowledging the care-giving roles that women perform can also be counterproductive. Therefore, effective gender mainstreaming requires targeted interventions that are aligned with women's roles in various societies. Gender-responsive approaches are often seen as essential for achieving transformative change. This transformation is a long-term process aimed at addressing ingrained biases comprehensively.

Ultimately, gender mainstreaming aims to shift the perspective from viewing women as merely vulnerable members of society to recognising them as active agents of change who can significantly contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation. However, when women are grouped with other vulnerable populations, such as youth, the elderly and people with disabilities, policies that label them as vulnerable fail to confront the underlying structural inequalities that particularly affect women. This oversight highlights the urgent need for change.

Moreover, to facilitate gender-transformative changes in climate action, it is essential to address the intersectional factors that affect women, including race, caste, ethnicity, economic class, geographic location or a combination of these factors. Therefore, gender mainstreaming cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all approach; it must consist of diverse and tailored policies to be effective.

Current state of gender mainstreaming in the LDCs' NDC 2.0

While LDCs have high gender inequality, their NDCs continue to have the lowest mention of gender. Gender is mentioned in only 24 out of the 44 UN-listed LDCs' NDC 2.0. Most of the LDCs that address gender are located in Africa.

The findings presented below illustrate how gender is integrated into NDC 2.0. To enhance comprehension, relevant examples from various countries that demonstrate these principles in action are included.

- The NDC 2.0 reports from all countries, regardless of their development status, generally mention gender only briefly. This pattern is also observed in LDCs. As a result, the differing impacts of climate mitigation or adaptation policies on various genders are often overlooked in climate actions, which is similarly evident in LDCs.
- When gender is referenced in the NDC activities of LDCs, the language often tends to be ambiguous or gender-neutral (see Box 2). In many instances, there are no specific follow-up plans for integrating gender considerations into climate action. For example, Burkina Faso's NDC 2.0 mentions gender mainstreaming as a key activity, stating that "gender mainstreaming must guide the implementation of climate action contained in the NDC". However, it lacks specific details on how this objective of gender mainstreaming will actually be incorporated into the NDC's implementation. This ambiguity is a common trend, and there are only a few exceptions where countries have established concrete gender action plans to address climate change.
- Some LDCs have acknowledged the necessity of implementing gender-transformative policies in response to climate change, whereby women are empowered as agents of change, leading to proposed structural changes in their NDCs. For instance, Chad's NDC 2.0 highlights the importance of involving women in decision-making roles by enhancing their access to education, economic opportunities, and information. However, such initiatives remain limited across most LDCs.
- A few LDCs that include gender-focussed climate change activities in their NDCs have noted that gender mainstreaming can be more effective when these policies and plans extend beyond the national level to include regional and other subnational governance. Additionally, some countries have identified that gender mainstreaming can be enhanced through policy coherence across different

ministries at the national level. In this context, specific ministries, such as the Ministry of Environment, can play a catalytic role in facilitating such integration.

- When gender is mentioned in a country's NDC, it is primarily associated with adaptation activities. However, the impacts of climate change on women are significantly different from those on men, particularly affecting their livelihoods, caregiving and other domestic responsibilities. Despite this, there is a lack of recognition of the specific challenges women face, especially regarding the climate extremes they endure and how these affect their care work and livelihoods. For instance, women living in areas experiencing extreme droughts require different adaptation support than those in regions prone to frequent flooding. Most NDCs do not account for the diverse effects of climate change on women in various geographical locations within the country. Only a few countries, such as Somalia, have acknowledged the urgent need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the varied impacts of climate change on women. This understanding is vital for better integrating gender considerations into climate action.
- When gender is addressed in mitigation activities within most NDCs, it is primarily in the agriculture sector, where women predominantly work in LDCs. A few exceptional countries, such as Somalia, emphasise the importance of integrating gender considerations across all sectors in climate actions, including environmental protection, the circular and green economy and the information and digital economy. This highlights the urgent need for holistic gender mainstreaming in climate efforts.
- In particular, the extent of women's involvement in climate change mitigation activities – such as the technological transition to a low-carbon economy – is limited and not sufficiently recognised in LDCs. This has significant implications for how countries design green jobs that are equitable in terms of gender, as well as how agriculture can be developed to minimise or eliminate negative climate impacts. Additionally, acknowledging care work as a green job can further promote gender mainstreaming in climate policies. Only a handful of countries have identified that, given that women constitute a significant proportion of agricultural workers, providing them with land ownership rights is critical. Women can seldom make climate-neutral choices and become change agents without ownership rights. Such NDC activities also have the potential to bring gender-transformative outcomes if pursued with subsequent legal changes in the countries mentioned, which are missing in most NDCs.
- The mention of gender is often grouped with youth, the elderly, and people with disabilities or similarly marginalised groups. Such co-grouping with a range of other marginalised groups may divert the focus on the need for policies that protect the specific economic and non-economic role women play in societies under climate change. Gender is in itself a complex and heterogeneous category given the intersections with other social and cultural constructs like race, caste, ethnicity and others that require attention at the granular level. Furthermore, the reasons behind the historical marginalisation of women are distinct from those affecting youth, people with disabilities, or older individuals. Therefore, it is essential to develop a separate set of policies aimed at reducing gender inequality in climate action.
- Only few LDCs recognise that women's participation in different decision-making forums is required for climate action. Some countries, like Chad, also recognise that structural changes are required so that gender transformative changes can be made where women are provided with education, information and economic empowerment. Uganda, another LDC country, goes a step further by reiterating its commitment towards gender equality in climate action by mentioning that women's

participation in different political spaces, especially at the regional level, is vital for achieving the commitments of NDCs.

- Gender-disaggregated data is essential for understanding the different impacts of climate change on women and girls. However, many countries do not prioritise the collection of this data in their NDC 2.0. For instance, Cambodia has acknowledged the importance of disaggregated data and has established specific roles for relevant ministries to monitor the gender-differentiated effects of climate change initiatives.

Policy implications and recommendations

Gender mainstreaming must be integrated into all stages of policy making and within society, rather than being treated as an add-on, as is often the case in many NDCs. It is essential to recognise that men and women play different roles in society, and climate action should be designed to reflect these differences. Ambitious NDCs should facilitate gender-transformative climate action. Some LDCs, such as Nepal and Cambodia, have made significant commitments to ensuring gender equality in their efforts to meet NDC targets, demonstrating their political will. However, in many LDCs, climate actions are often dependent on foreign support. The international development community can assist countries committed to gender mainstreaming in their NDCs by providing climate finance to help them achieve their goals for gender equality in climate action. Ambitious NDCs should enable gender-transformative climate action.

Women in LDCs, especially those most vulnerable to climate-related disasters, should be prioritised, focussing on the most remote and severely affected communities first. However, the cost of achieving climate goals globally is increasing each year, and funding sources are at risk of diminishing. Funds allocated for adaptation are even less than those for

mitigation. Therefore, international support should be targeted towards achieving specific outcomes rather than being spread too thin across numerous projects.

Gender mainstreaming in climate change mitigation action would be essential to create opportunities for all genders to participate in technological transformation to a low-carbon society. Women can do most jobs if proper provisions are made to enhance their capacities to participate in the job market. Specific programmes for women's skill and capacity development in energy, transportation, circular economy and sustainable agriculture can be prioritised. However, women's roles as caregivers must be recognised to help them overcome the challenges of participating in new low-carbon opportunities while finding ways to recognise care work as a low-carbon activity and creating proper compensation mechanisms for it. This can also allow women to become more active agents of climate actions. Projects with multiple impacts, such as increasing women's livelihood options can help achieve multiple co-aligned goals.

Projects with gender transformative plans take time and require long-term funding, which is often carried out by select entities, such as non-governmental organisations. Short-term project-based funding can plant seeds of trust, yet much work remains unachieved as time passes. Long-term commitments are required to ensure that the hard-earned gains from the projects are not lost due to a lack of funding. Therefore, projects can be designed in such a way that they help build the core capacities of organisations that help them become financially independent. This is also true in increasing women's participation in local, regional and national decision making within countries, which requires time. Not all women have equal capacities or power to articulate or share their experiences due to existing patriarchal norms that often rehash their feelings of "not being good enough" or important enough to be part of important decisions concerning their well-being.

Research is required to develop evidence-based solutions. LDCs often lack the financial capacity to invest in developing scientific networks and institutions within their countries required for long-term and dedicated research to understand, for example, the gender-differentiated local impacts of climate change. Gender mainstreaming is not a box to be ticked in projects, however, and should be nuanced, which requires research so that local circumstances inform the NDCs. Therefore, supporting research to find evidence on what works to improve gender equality action is required. For this, long-term, equitable and value-based partnerships aimed at improving gender equality in climate action must be created for capacity building. This includes support for data collection.

Data collection should not be the goal but a means to achieve the goal. Collecting gender-disaggregated data is insufficient if not used to evaluate, implement and fund transformative programmes tackling gender inequality.

Conclusion

NDC 3.0 offers opportunities for gender mainstreaming that should not be missed by any country, especially as this round of NDC will underline the climate commitments for the next five years. LDCs have unique challenges, and development cooperation could play an important role in supporting the implementation of these national commitments.

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