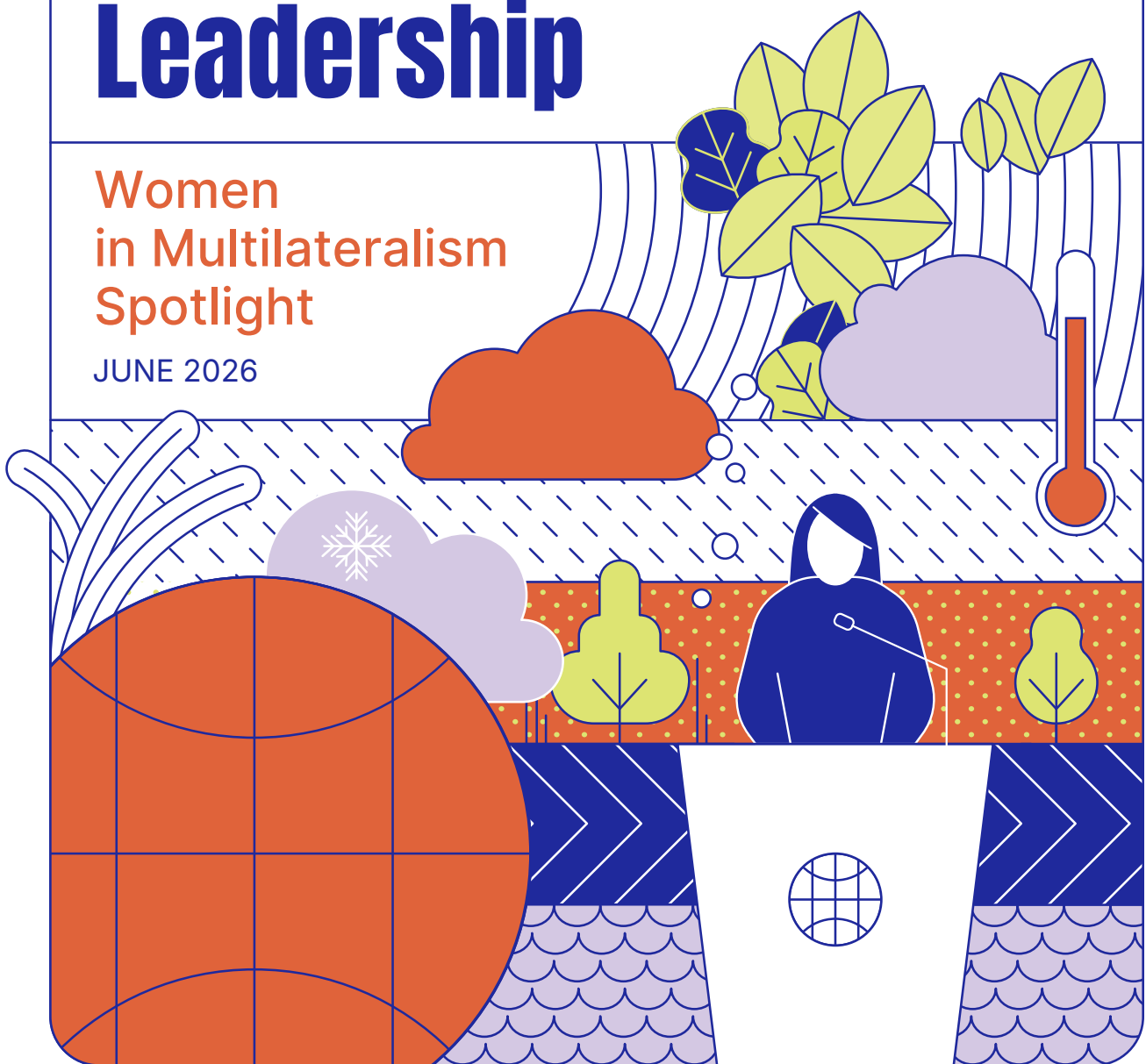




Women in Global Climate and Environmental Leadership

Women
in Multilateralism
Spotlight

JUNE 2026



Women in Global Climate and Environmental Leadership

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About GWL Voices

GWL Voices is an organization of women leaders from all regions and backgrounds committed to building a gender-equal international system that effectively advances sustainable development, peace, security, and human rights – all of which converge on the issues of climate change and environmental degradation. GWL Voices' almost eighty members leverage their voices and experience to shape and rally global leaders and public opinion to build a gender-equal international system that places women's rights and transformative power at the center.

For more information, visit <https://www.gwlvoices.org/>

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
COP	Conference of the Parties
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Why Women's Leadership Matters in Climate Governance

As part of GWL Voices' ongoing efforts to provide rigorous data and analysis on women's leadership within the multilateral system, this spotlight offers an opportunity to deepen and broaden the evidence base on women's participation in different areas of global governance. Building on the insights and methodologies developed through GWL Voices' Women in Multilateralism reports and the Spotlight on Women in Global Health Leadership, this new spotlight on climate and environmental governance responds to a timely and strategic need: **understanding who holds power within the global climate system and how gender shapes access to that power.**

The climate crisis continues to deepen. As temperatures rise, extreme weather events increase in frequency and intensity. As environmental degradation and pollution spread, resources vital for a dignified and healthy life on earth, such as stable ecosystems, healthy soil, and clean water and air become scarcer, fuel conflict, and generate instability. Populations across the world already feel the impacts of a changing climate and environment on their lives and livelihoods, yet women and girls often suffer a disproportionate burden. Despite their central role in community resilience, adaptation, and environmental stewardship, women remain markedly underrepresented in the highest levels of decision making. Women's perspectives are indispensable for effective climate

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governance. By examining leadership, participation, and institutional policies across key climate and environmental bodies, this spotlight offers a unique analysis that can help reshape global debates, particularly in the Conference of the Parties (COPs) of the three Rio Conventions, as well as beyond.

By tracing who holds power in climate governance, this spotlight strengthens GWL Voices' long-term effort to ensure that women's leadership becomes a recognized pillar of global governance.

The following report is structured around four interconnected components that together illuminate the scale of gender inequality in global climate leadership.

- **Section 1** presents a quantitative overview of women's representation across major climate and environmental institutions, including COP conferences, leadership positions, and governing bodies.
- **Section 2** complements these findings with insights from the literature and interviews with women leaders, offering a qualitative understanding of how power is experienced and exercised.
- **Section 3** examines the internal policies that shape staffing, leadership pathways, and workplace cultures across key climate and environmental institutions.
- **Section 4** concludes by synthesizing the evidence and outlining what it means for advancing more inclusive and effective climate governance, highlighting the institutional and systemic shifts needed to address the climate and environmental crisis.

Together, these components provide a holistic and accessible picture of where women stand today in climate governance, and what must shift for parity to be achieved.

1. What the Numbers Reveal: A Gender Imbalance That Persists

Although women are increasingly visible in climate activism, adaptation initiatives, and community-level resilience efforts, they remain significantly underrepresented in the global institutions where the most consequential climate decisions are made. To understand where women stand within the formal architecture of global climate governance, this report draws on structured research assessing participation across three major multilateral environmental conventions—the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)—as well as the leadership of four influential environmental organizations and climate funds: the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

This research examines gender representation across multiple dimensions of global environmental governance, including:

- Participation in COP processes as delegation members, heads of delegations, and bureau membership, for the most recent COPs at the time of writing, namely UNFCCC COP30, CBD COP16, and UNCCD COP16.
- COP presidencies over time, covering UNFCCC (COP1 to COP30), CBD (COP1 to COP16), and UNCCD (COP1 to COP16).
- Gender Focal Points and National Focal Points within the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD.
- Historical leadership from 1972 to 2025 of key global environmental institutions, including CBD, GCF, GEF, IPCC, UNCCD, UNEP and UNFCCC.



Taken together, these layers offer a comprehensive overview of women's presence in climate decision-making spaces, revealing clear patterns of progress and stagnation.

1.1 Women lead gender agendas, but are underrepresented in broader national coordination

Two out of three Rio Conventions have a system in place responsible for ensuring that gender considerations are integrated into the conventions' work on climate and environment. These are the UNFCCC and CBD. Where these gender focal points exist, they are overwhelmingly occupied by women. These roles are essential for mainstreaming gender across negotiations and implementation processes, and the substantial female presence reflects deep expertise and commitment.

WOMEN ARE ENTRUSTED WITH ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY, YET ARE LESS FREQUENTLY POSITIONED IN ROLES WITH BROADER STRATEGIC INFLUENCE.

But when the scope of authority broadens, representation narrows. As seen in the graph below, at the time of writing, women occupy only about a third of national focal point positions, which are the roles that coordinate a country's overall engagement with the convention and shape national negotiating priorities.

This contrast suggests a form of horizontal segregation: women are entrusted with advancing gender equality, yet are less frequently positioned in roles with broader strategic influence.

WOMEN AS GENDER FOCAL POINTS AND NATIONAL FOCAL POINTS (%)

National Gender Focal Points*



National Focal Points



■ FEMALE ■ MALE

*Includes only CBD and UNFCCC.

1.2 At the most recent COPs, the CBD COP stands out for near gender parity

The COPs are major global meetings held by each Rio Convention where countries send delegations to set the course of international climate and environmental action, including through negotiations. A different host country presides over each conference, with a high-level national official serving as COP president.

Beyond the system of (gender) focal points, there are several roles through which actors engage in the conventions, including as members of national delegations, heads of delegation, and members of the COP Bureau, which advises on the overall management of the process.

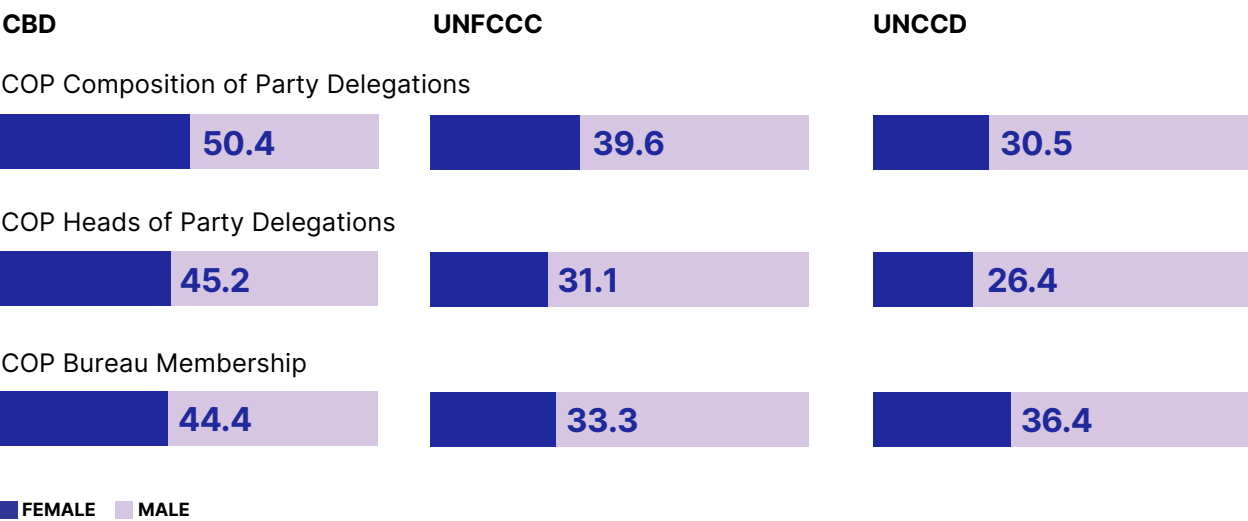
Among the latest COPs assessed, the CBD is the only convention that comes close to achieving gender balance across these roles. As evidenced in the graphs below, women constituted half of all delegates at COP16 in 2024 and are comparably represented among heads of delegation and bureau members.

In contrast, the UNFCCC and UNCCD COPs continue to lag behind. Although women participate in each of these processes, their numbers fall well short of parity, particularly in the higher-level role of bureau membership. At the UNFCCC COP30 in 2025, women represented less than a third of all heads of party delegations. At UNCCD COP16 in 2024, approximately one quarter of heads of delegations were women.

This highlights the variability across conventions and suggests that institutional culture, governance traditions, and constituency dynamics play a significant role in shaping women’s access to influence.

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION AS HEADS OF PARTY DELEGATION, PARTY DELEGATIONS, AND BUREAU MEMBERSHIP BY CONVENTION (%)

CBD (COP 16), UNCCD (COP 16), and UNFCCC (COP 30).



1.3 Among COP presidencies, representation narrows further

COP presidencies, which are among the most visible and influential roles in global climate governance, are where the gender gap becomes most pronounced. The graph below shows that no convention has reached parity. The CBD again performs best, though remains far from equal representation with just under 30% of CBD presidents having been women. The UNFCCC shows even lower levels, and the UNCCD records the widest disparity, with women occupying just over 12% of all presidencies since its first COP.

These patterns underscore how the highest-level positions remain the most difficult for women to access.

WOMEN IN COP HISTORICAL PRESIDENCY (%)

COP 1 to 16 (CBD), COP 1 to 16 (UNCCD), COP 1 to 30 (UNFCCC).

CBD



UNFCCC



UNCCD

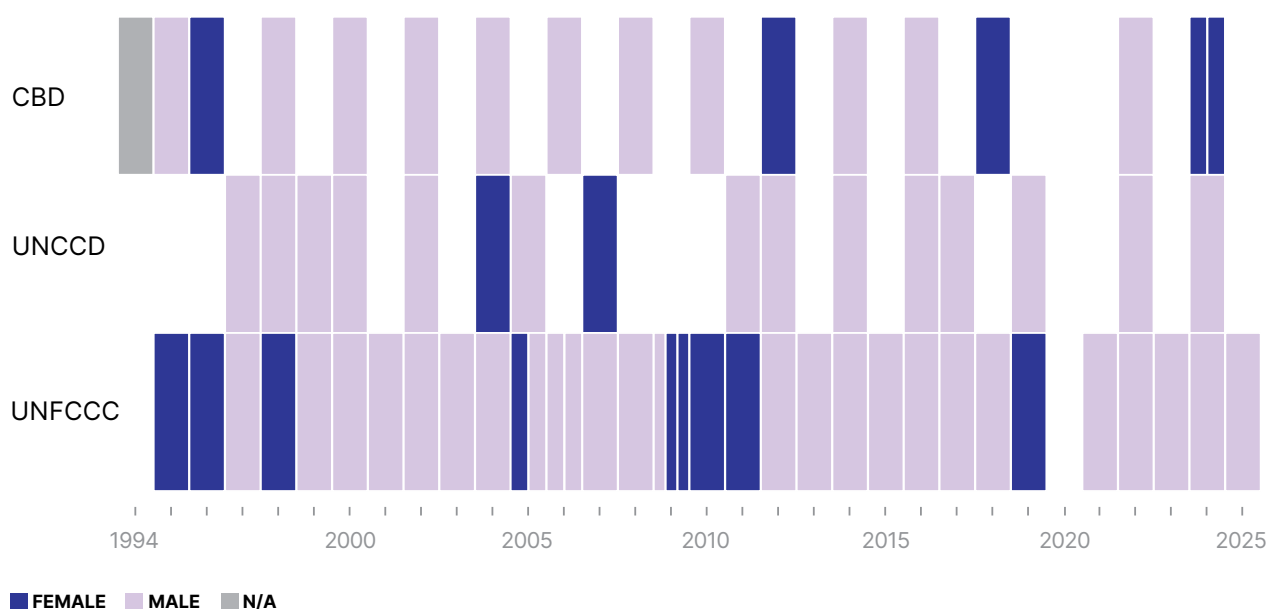


■ FEMALE ■ MALE ■ N/A

The sporadic appointment of women to COP presidencies seen below suggests that progress remains uneven and not yet institutionalized.

WOMEN IN COP HISTORICAL PRESIDENCY OVER TIME

COP 1 to 16 (CBD), COP 1 to 16 (UNCCD), COP 1 to 30 (UNFCCC).



*The thinner bars on the chart refer to years when there was more than one president.

COPs for all three conventions did not take place in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.4 Across regions, the gender gap varies

Gender inequalities intersect with geopolitical disparities, creating uneven access to leadership among regions. As seen in the following graph, women's participation is strongest in delegations from Western and Eastern European and other States, where several roles approach or reach parity.

In contrast, women's representation remains lowest in African and Asia-Pacific delegations. These gaps increase in aforementioned leadership roles such as heads of delegation, suggesting that structural inequalities between regions carry over into global environmental governance.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COPS BY REGION OF ORIGIN (%)

As Party Delegates, Bureau Members and COP Presidencies at CBD (COP 16), UNCCD (COP 16) and UNFCCC (COP 30).

Global



Western European and other States



Eastern European States



Latin America and Caribbean States



Asia-Pacific States



African States



■ FEMALE ■ MALE

The graph below shows that across all regions, women are more present around the negotiation table than at its head. In Eastern Europe, just over half of all party delegates are women (50.8%), and Western Europe follows closely with 47.8%. African States lag further behind, with women making up just 33% of delegates. But once we look at the heads of delegations, women's visibility drops sharply. In Eastern Europe, their representation falls to 36.1%, in Western Europe to 38.6%, and in Asia Pacific to only 29.3%. The contrast confirms a familiar pattern across regions: women participate, contribute, and show up in the work of climate diplomacy, yet they remain far less likely to lead their national delegations.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COPS BY REGION OF ORIGIN (%)

CBD (COP 16), UNCCD (COP 20) and UNFCCC (COP 30).

Party Delegations

Global



Eastern European States



Western European and other States



Latin America and Caribbean States



Asia-Pacific States



African States



■ FEMALE ■ MALE

Heads of Party Delegations



Based on this data, a female delegate is on average 15% less likely³ than a male delegate to serve as head of delegation.

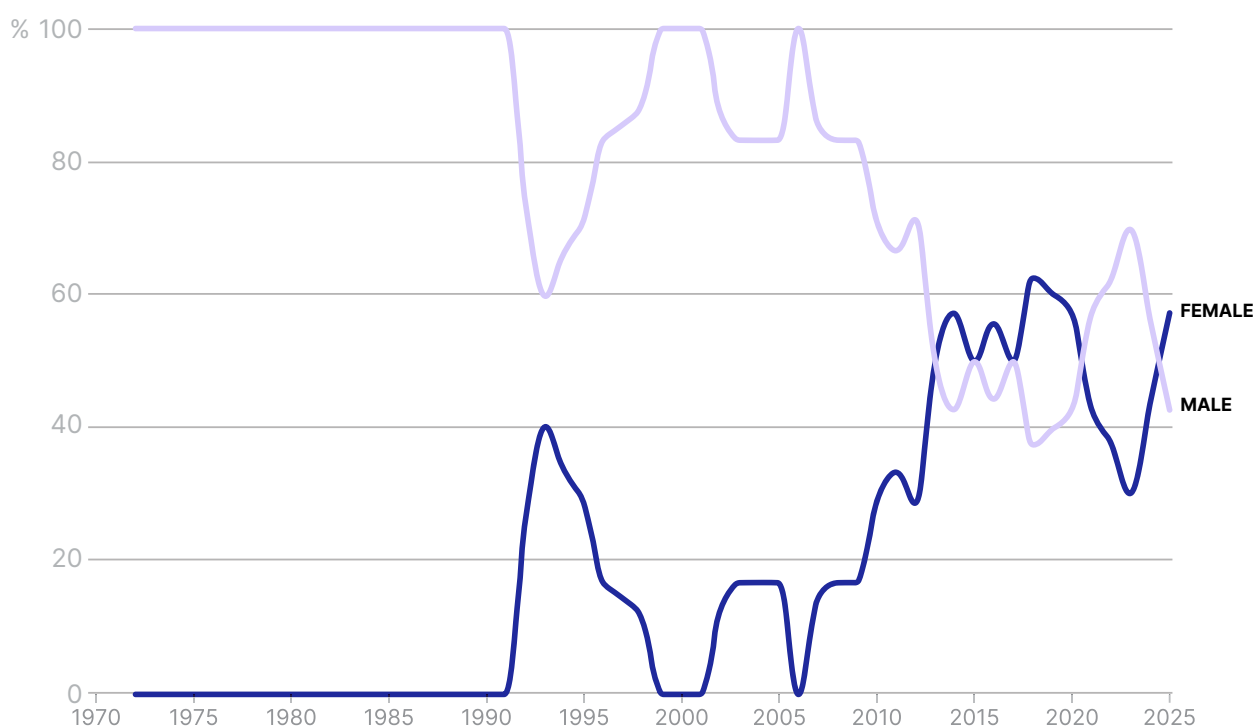
³ Relative likelihood calculated as the ratio between the proportion of female heads among all female delegates and the proportion of male heads among all male delegates.

1.5 Beyond the COPs, progress remains uneven

Women started gaining visibility in executive leadership across climate and environmental institutions in the mid-1990s, with progress emerging in institutions like CBD, UNEP and GEF. Although this upward trend reversed after 2020, when men again held most senior positions, 2025 shows a notable rebound: women now account for 57.1% of leadership roles in the seven institutions analyzed.

FEMALE HEADS OF KEY ORGANIZATIONS SINCE THEIR FOUNDING (%)

From 1972 to 2025 in CBD, GCF, GEF, IPCC, UNCCD, UNEP and UNFCCC.



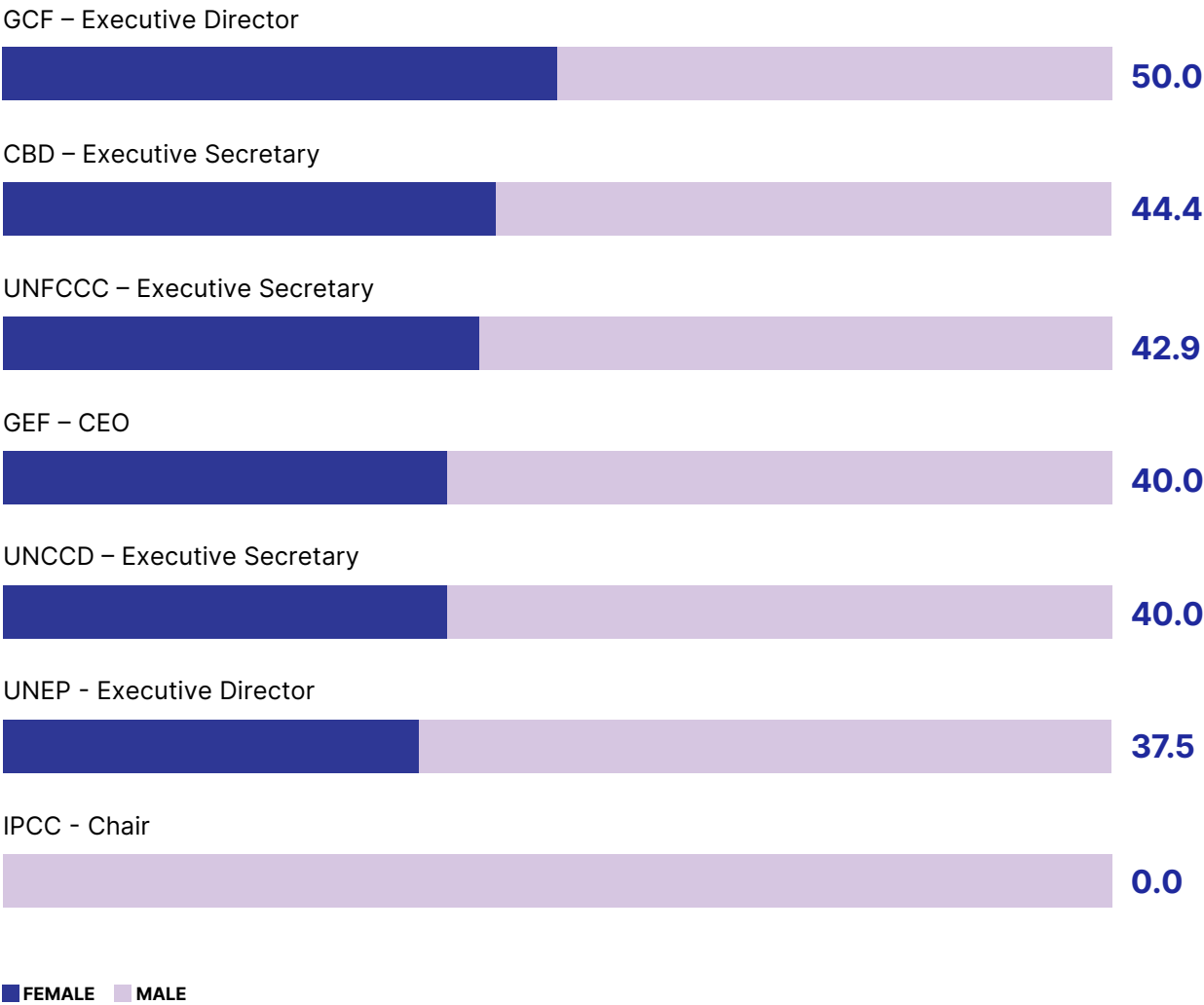
Examining women's leadership by institution reveals a mixed picture. Representation varies widely: while the GCF has approached gender parity in its top leadership role over time, other institutions, including UNEP, the UNFCCC,

the CBD, the UNCCD, and the GEF, have not achieved consistent balance, averaging between 37% and 43% women in such roles.

The IPCC stands out as the starkest example of imbalance: in its nearly four decades of existence, it has never elected a woman as chair. Its last elections in 2023 were the first time in the history of the organization that women candidates ran for this position. Still, their absence in past elections and as chairs is

FEMALE HEADS OF KEY ORGANIZATIONS SINCE THEIR FOUNDING (%)

From 1972 to 2025 in CBD, GCF, GEF, IPCC, UNCCD, UNEP and UNFCCC.





particularly significant given the IPCC's central role in interpreting climate science and shaping the global understanding of climate risks.

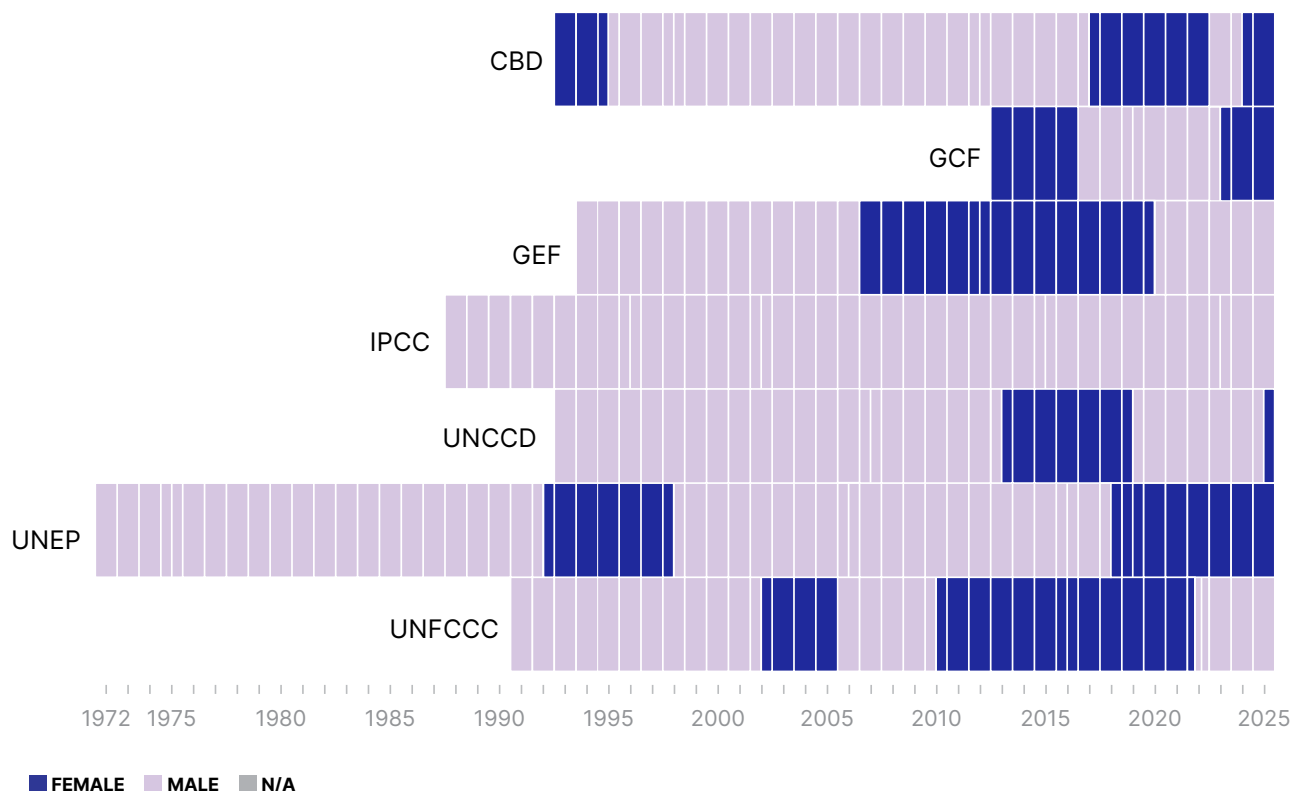
A closer look at leadership trajectories over time reveals that disparities are not only about access, but also about duration and continuity in power. Across the seven institutions analyzed, women have held leadership positions in 30.3% of all observed years, highlighting their still limited presence over time. In addition, leadership mandates held by men tend to last significantly longer than those held by women. On average, male mandates extend to 7.1 years, while women's mandates last 4.6 years. This gap reflects both structural barriers to retention and the more recent entry of women into senior roles, meaning many female mandates are still ongoing. Still, the pattern is consistent: men are more likely to consolidate long-term leadership, while women's presence tends to be more recent and, in many cases, more fragmented.

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PROGRESS IS UNDERWAY,
WITH WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
BECOMING BOTH MORE
FREQUENT AND MORE STABLE
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Trends over the past two decades point to gradual improvement. When looking only at the last 20 years, the share of years women have led these organizations and conventions increases from 30.3% to 43.6%, indicating a more sustained presence of women in senior roles. At the same time, the gap in mandate duration has narrowed: in the last 20 years, women's mandates averaged 5.3 years, compared to 4.6 years across the full dataset analysed - with men's mandate durations shortening from 7.1 to 5.8 years. Taken together, these patterns suggest that while inequalities persist, progress is underway, with women's leadership becoming both more frequent and more stable over time.

FEMALES HEADS OF KEY ORGANIZATIONS SINCE THEIR FOUNDING OVER TIME

From 1972 to 2025 in CBD, GCF, GEF, IPCC, UNCCD, UNEP and UNFCCC.



*The thinner bars on the chart refer to years when there was more than one president.

Overall Insights

Across conventions, organizations, and roles, the data tells a consistent story:

- Women are well represented in gender-specific positions, particularly as gender focal points, but remain underrepresented in broader strategic and leadership roles, such as national focal points, heads of delegation, bureau members, and COP presidents.

- 
- Representation varies across conventions: the CBD emerges as the strongest performer, while the UNFCCC and UNCCD show significantly lower levels of female representation.
 - The greatest gaps appear in high-level positions, where women's presence remains the exception rather than the norm.
 - Regional disparities compound gender gaps, with higher representation in Eastern Europe and Western Europe, and considerably lower participation in Asia-Pacific and Africa, reinforcing long-standing geopolitical inequalities in global climate governance.

Together, these findings reveal a system where women contribute essential leadership and expertise, yet still face longstanding barriers to accessing the most influential and consequential roles. The next section explores how evidence and testimonies from women negotiators help explain these patterns of power and influence.

2. What Evidence and Women Leaders Say About Power and Influence

While the quantitative analysis presented in Section 1 reveals persistent gender gaps across climate and environmental governance, numbers alone cannot fully explain how power is accessed or constrained within these spaces. To better understand the dynamics behind women's representation in leadership roles, this section draws on two complementary sources:

1. existing literature on women's leadership in climate governance
2. qualitative insights from interviews with women leaders who have operated within or alongside multilateral climate institutions.

Together, this evidence helps explain why women remain underrepresented in formal decision-making roles, while also illustrating how women's leadership contributes to more inclusive and effective climate action when space is made for it.

2.1 What the literature tells us: representation, power and outcomes

A substantial body of research confirms that women remain underrepresented in climate and environmental decision-making at both global and national levels. Reports from the UNFCCC Secretariat (2022) and the OECD (2021, 2022) document persistent gender imbalances across COP delegations, constituted bodies, and leadership positions within the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD, despite long-standing commitments to gender equality. These findings align closely with the data presented in Section 1 of this report.



The link between gender equality and climate and environmental issues is increasingly being recognized. However, early efforts to integrate gender into climate governance faced significant resistance. Different women, including Melanne Verweir, who served as the first United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, played a key role in helping bring gender equality and women's participation onto the multilateral climate agenda. Momentum built through key moments such as COP17 in Durban, where leaders including Verweir and Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland and a prominent advocate for climate justice, helped elevate the issue within negotiations, ultimately contributing to the development of the UNFCCC's Lima Work Programme on Gender, and its Gender Action Plan.

Gender considerations are now more established within climate governance, and the literature shows that increasing women's leadership is not only a matter of equity, but of effectiveness. Multiple empirical studies demonstrate that greater female representation in political and governance institutions is associated with stronger environmental outcomes. Research by Norgaard and York (2005), Mavisakalyan and Tarverdi (2018), and Fredriksson and Wang (2011) finds that women leaders are more likely to support environmental protection, ratify environmental treaties, and adopt stricter climate policies. Similarly, Cook, Grillos, and Andersson (2019) show that gender quotas can increase both the equity and effectiveness of climate interventions.

**INCREASING WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP IS NOT ONLY A
MATTER OF EQUITY, BUT OF
EFFECTIVENESS.**

These findings are reflected in practice in key moments of global climate governance, where women's political leadership has played a decisive role in rebuilding trust, sustaining participation, and delivering breakthrough multilateral agreements.



Holding the Process Together: Restoring Trust in the COP16 Cancún Agreements

Following the disappointment of COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, widely perceived as a failure, with procedural and transparency concerns, fraught negotiations, and a weak political outcome, the multilateral climate system was facing a serious crisis of trust. Many delegations, particularly from developing countries, questioned both the legitimacy of the process and the way key decisions had been made. As Mexico prepared to host COP16 in Cancún, the challenge was clear: restoring confidence in the negotiations required a fundamental shift in how the process itself was conducted.

With this diagnosis in mind, the Mexican government departed from the usual practice of appointing an environment minister as COP president and instead designated Patricia Espinosa, then Secretary of Foreign Affairs. The decision reflected an understanding that the core challenge was political rather than technical. Under her leadership, COP16 was marked by a deliberately inclusive and participatory approach, with extensive consultations, active listening to divergent positions, and sustained efforts to keep all Parties engaged in the negotiations. The process was reinforced by broader coalitions and leadership dynamics that prioritized trust-building, transparency, and inclusion, with women leaders playing an important role both within formal roles and through behind-the-scenes diplomacy. These efforts helped ease tensions after Copenhagen and enabled the adoption of the Cancún Agreements, which are widely regarded as a turning point that restored momentum, legitimacy, and confidence in the multilateral climate governance process.

At the global level, analyses by the World Economic Forum (2022) and UN Women (n.d.) emphasize that gender-diverse leadership contributes to more ambitious climate policy, better integration of social dimensions, and improved responsiveness to the needs of vulnerable populations. Yet these same sources point to enduring structural barriers, including exclusion from technical spaces, informal power networks, and senior decision-making roles, which continue to limit women's influence within multilateral climate institutions.

Importantly, several studies highlight a recurring pattern also visible in this report's data: women are more likely to be included in advisory, social, or gender-specific roles, while remaining excluded from positions that control resources, negotiations, and strategic direction. This horizontal and vertical segregation reinforces the idea that women's expertise is valued, though not in all areas or hierarchies. Still, they have shaped some of the most significant moments in climate governance.

Delivering a Global Climate Pact: Women's Leadership and the Paris Agreement

When the multilateral climate process set out to build a global climate agreement after years of stalled negotiations, Christiana Figueres played a central diplomatic role. Appointed Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC in 2010, she inherited a process that was fragile and fragmented across regions and political blocs. Over six years, she advanced inclusivity and consensus building, working with COP presidencies and bringing a wider set of stakeholders into the process. This effort also depended on collaboration across institutions. As highlighted by Rachel Kyte, then Vice President for Climate Change at the World Bank, she and Figueres worked together closely in the lead

up to Paris, creating a collaborative relationship despite the traditional institutional tensions that existed between the World Bank and the UN. Both in leadership positions within their respective institutions, they chose to communicate directly, calling each other personally when disagreements arose, working through disagreements in a renewed way. Kyte credits this approach with helping to deliver a stronger finance agreement in Paris, and expressed hope that the working relationship the two women modeled may have shifted the cultures of both institutions in a small but lasting way.

In 2015, at COP21, 196 Parties adopted the Paris Agreement. The outcome reflected not only the work of the UNFCCC Secretariat, but also key negotiators and leaders, including Laurence Tubiana, whose outstanding contributions shaped the agreement's architecture, and Izabella Teixeira, who was instrumental in bridging positions across major blocks. The agreement united nearly every country around climate goals, demonstrating the value of inclusive and coordinated leadership in achieving breakthrough multilateral outcomes.

2.2 Advancing climate leadership through an intersectional lens and informal power dynamics

Interview evidence reinforces an important point raised in the literature: women are not a monolithic group. Increased representation alone does not guarantee progressive climate outcomes. Differences in political ideology, national context, institutional incentives, and social position, including class, geography, and access to resources, continue to shape how women leaders engage with climate issues and the extent to which they are able to influence decision-making processes. Women from wealthier countries, elite institutions, or diplomatic

networks often face different constraints and opportunities than those from frontline or historically marginalized communities.

These differences are particularly significant when considering Indigenous women and other frontline climate leaders, whose knowledge is grounded in lived experience and territorial stewardship, yet whose voices have historically been marginalized or confined to consultative rather than decision-making roles. As highlighted by the UNFCCC (2021), Indigenous women play a vital role in climate action as environmental defenders and community leaders, while continuing to face structural barriers to full and effective participation in decision-making. Ensuring that Indigenous women and other frontline climate actors are heard and empowered to shape agendas and outcomes is essential for achieving more equitable and effective climate governance.

Elevating Indigenous Women's Leadership: The Indigenous Peoples Platform

Indigenous women leaders, particularly from Africa and Latin America, have played an important role in UNFCCC COP negotiations, by pushing for greater gender equality commitments, and helping to implement and advance the three iterations of the UNFCCC's Gender Action Plan. However, the influence of Indigenous women on global climate governance is often limited by a lack of formal access to the spaces and institutions where decisions are made. Women leaders already working within the multilateral climate system have driven important advances in this regard, helping create greater space for others to take their rightful place in climate decision-making.

During COP23, Maria Fernanda Espinosa, then Ambassador of Ecuador in Geneva, played a central role in negotiating the creation of a formal platform for Indigenous Peoples' participation in climate governance. This platform marked a significant shift, formalizing Indigenous participation within the multilateral climate system and creating a precedent for similar efforts in other environmental conventions. Espinosa emphasized that its success depended on strong alliances between Indigenous organizations and supportive governments, as well as the leadership of women, who represented a majority of those involved in advancing and negotiating the initiative.

Leadership dynamics themselves can also reflect broader structural biases. Research highlights a pattern often referred to as the “glass cliff.” Studies by Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) show that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during periods of crisis or institutional difficulty, while men are more frequently selected to lead during times of stability and success. As a result, women who reach senior leadership roles may do so under more challenging circumstances, facing higher expectations and a greater risk of failure. Interview insights echo this dynamic, suggesting that women are often called upon to lead in moments where the likelihood of failure is high.

Beyond formal leadership positions, both the literature and interviewees highlight the importance of informal power and procedural dynamics in shaping influence within multilateral climate governance. Decision-making at COPs and within constituted bodies often operates through informal

WOMEN ARE OFTEN CALLED UPON TO LEAD IN MOMENTS WHERE THE LIKELIHOOD OF FAILURE IS HIGH.



negotiations, closed coordination meetings, and long-standing networks of trust, which are not always visible in official structures. IIED (2025) research shows that these informal spaces frequently reproduce existing power hierarchies, making them less accessible to women and other underrepresented groups, even when formal participation has improved.

As a result, increases in women's representation do not automatically translate into influence over agendas, negotiation outcomes, or resource allocation. This helps explain why women may be present in delegations or advisory roles, yet remain marginal to the moments where strategic decisions are shaped. Addressing gender gaps in climate governance therefore requires attention not only to who holds formal positions, but also to how decision-making processes are structured, whose voices are amplified, and how pathways to influence are created within institutions.

In practice, this often comes down to who gets access to opportunities, networks, and visibility within institutions. As Rachel Kyte emphasized, mentorship alone is often insufficient in these contexts. More active forms of sponsorship, which create opportunities, expand networks, and increase visibility in decision-making spaces, are critical to build a pipeline of emerging female leaders and to enable access to positions of influence.

Across interviews, several leaders also described forms of collaboration grounded in openness, trust-building, and the willingness to acknowledge institutional limits. Rather than projecting unilateral authority, many emphasized creating space for mutual dependence and shared responsibility across actors and institutions. This reflects what scholars describe as *reciprocal vulnerability*, a form of leadership that

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OR RESOURCE ALLOCATION.**



recognizes interdependence and builds legitimacy through openness and shared accountability. In complex and fragmented governance settings such as climate diplomacy, this approach can play a critical role in sustaining cooperation across political differences and competing national interests.

2.3 Looking ahead: why leadership still matters

Despite these complexities, the combined evidence is clear: the persistent exclusion of women from senior decision-making roles comes at a cost. As multiple studies demonstrate, gender-diverse leadership is associated with more effective governance, stronger environmental protection, and more inclusive policy outcomes. Yet, as the data in Section 1 shows, women remain largely absent from the roles where global climate priorities are negotiated and set.

Interview insights in Section 2 suggest that closing this gap will require more than incremental increases in participation. It will require deliberate efforts to elevate women into positions of authority, challenge narrow definitions of expertise, and strengthen institutional pathways that allow women's leadership to influence climate governance at scale.

3. The Rules of the Game: How Institutional Policies Shape Representation

Understanding women's representation in climate governance requires looking not only at who participates, but also at the internal rules, policies, and cultures that shape access to leadership. Behind every delegation, bureau member, or executive head stands an institution whose hiring systems, workplace norms, and accountability mechanisms influence who rises, and who does not.

This policy review examines gender equality policies across the major international climate and environmental organizations linked to the UNEP, GEF, GCF, and IPCC and UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD conventions. While these bodies operate under different governance structures (some under UN rules, some within the World Bank, and others through independent frameworks) they collectively play a defining role in shaping the pipeline of women who participate in global climate diplomacy.

Because these policies can be highly technical when viewed individually, the following pages group them into two broader policy areas: Human Resources Policies and Internal Governance Policies.

3.1 Human resources policies: opening the door or holding it shut

Human resources policies determine how women enter institutions, advance through them, and experience daily work. Across the organizations studied, four aspects stand out as fundamental: recruitment, workplace culture, professional advancement, and work–life balance.

HR POLICIES

References

✓ Policy present — No information or policy not available online

Policy Area	Sub-Area	UNEP / CBD / UNCCD / UNFCCC (UN Policy)	GCF	GEF (World Bank Policy)	IPCC
Recruitment & Hiring	Equal Opportunity and Fair Selection Processes	✓ (Assessment panel, roster retention, transparency)	✓ (Gender diversity in recruitment)	✓ (Gender parity goals in new positions)	— No information
Inclusive Culture	Diversity Training	✓ ("I Know Gender" training)	— No information	✓ (Capacity-building on gender equality)	✓ (Gender diversity pilot training)
	Policies on Sexual Abuse & Harassment	✓ (Prohibition bulletin, training, protection measures)	✓ (Code of Misconduct)	✓ (Sexual Harassment Action Plan)	✓ (Code of Conduct)
Promotion & Advancement	Mentorship, Sponsorship & Leadership Development	— No information	— No information	✓ (Mentoring and leadership programs)	— No information
Work-Life Balance	Flexible Work Arrangements	✓ (Staggered hours, part-time, telework, compressed schedule)	✓ (Remote work 100 days/year)	✓ (Generous leave flexibility)	✓ (Flexible options listed, limited detail)
	Parental Leave and Support	✓ (Maternity, paternity, adoption, breastfeeding)	✓ (Extended maternity and parental leave)	✓ (Primary/secondary caregiver leave)	✓ (Listed, details missing)
	Childcare Assistance	✓ (Children's allowance, family support)	✓ (Education assistance for dependents)	✓ (On-site childcare in HQ)	— No information

1. Recruitment & hiring: creating a diverse pipeline from the start

Efforts to ensure fairness and gender balance begin with recruitment. UN-system organizations (UNEP, UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD) have established some of the most structured mechanisms: ensuring gender-balanced assessment panels, requiring at least one woman on every hiring panel, and mandating transparency when external candidates are selected. They also maintain longer roster retention for women, which can meaningfully enlarge the pool of eligible female candidates.

The GEF, following World Bank policies, sets gender parity goals for new hires, particularly in regions where representation has historically been low, such as Africa and Asia. The GCF, though operating independently, explicitly links its recruitment policies to commitments to both gender and geographic diversity. By contrast, the IPCC provides no available information on recruitment measures, reflecting the more limited administrative structure of the Panel.

2. Inclusive culture: establishing safe, respectful, and gender-sensitive workplaces

Organizational culture affects women's ability to thrive once hired. Most institutions have taken steps to build more inclusive environments, though the maturity and depth of these measures vary.

2.1. Diversity and gender training

The UN system requires all staff to complete the "I Know Gender" course, building shared understanding across entities. The CBD supplements this with training on gender and biodiversity, and the UNFCCC integrates gender considerations into its capacity-building materials. The GEF offers courses on gender equality and social inclusion, while the IPCC has begun pilot training on gender diversity.



2.2 Protection from harassment and abuse

All UN-system entities apply the organization-wide framework prohibiting discrimination, harassment, and abuse of authority, supported by mandatory training.

The GEF implements a Sexual Harassment Action Plan, including monitoring and designated coordinators, and the GCF's Code of Conduct includes explicit prohibitions. The IPCC applies its Code of Conduct to all meetings and events.

These efforts collectively suggest growing recognition that gender equality depends not only on recruitment but also on the everyday experience of staff across institutions.

3. Promotion & advancement: the missing link in many institutions

While recruitment policies are increasingly robust, far fewer organizations have developed structured pathways for women's advancement once inside the organization.

The GEF, as part of the World Bank Group, stands alone in offering formal mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives aimed at supporting women's professional growth. Other organizations present no publicly available information on structured advancement mechanisms.

This gap is significant: without clear promotion pathways, the underrepresentation visible at the upper tiers of climate governance is likely to persist.

4. Work–life balance: making leadership compatible with care

Flexible policies can be decisive for women balancing professional and caregiving responsibilities, particularly in international roles requiring travel or long deployment periods.

UN-system agencies offer a comprehensive menu of flexible options: staggered working hours, telecommuting, compressed work schedules, and part-time roles. The GEF allows up to 100 remote working days per year, including from abroad; the GCF offers extended parental and family leave options.

Parental and adoption leave provisions are also more detailed and generous in the UN system and the GCF, while the IPCC lists benefits without specifying their scope.

These differences reflect varied institutional capacities, but they also influence who can reasonably pursue or sustain leadership roles within the climate system.

3.2 Internal governance policies

Internal governance policies refer to mechanisms that institutionalize gender equality within organizational structures. This includes gender action plans, designated focal points, units, and monitoring systems.

INTERNAL GOVERNANCE POLICIES

References

 Policy present
  Partially present
  No information or policy not available online

Organization/ Convention	Internal Gender Governance		Gender Parity Targets, Monitoring, and Evaluation
	Gender Focal Point or Unit	Gender Equality Strategy / Action Plan	Public Availability of Gender Staff Data
UNEP	 Gender and Safeguards Unit	 Partially ⁴	 UNEP Gender Parity Dashboard
GCF	 No information of a formal unit	 Green Climate Fund Gender Action Plan	 No information
GEF	 GEF Gender Partnership (cross- agency collaboration)	 GEF Gender Implementation Strategy	 No information
IPCC	 Gender Action Team	 IPCC Gender Policy And Implementation Plan	 No information
CBD	 Gender Focal Points designated at Secretariat and national levels	 2015-2020 Gender Plan of Action	 Partially ⁵
UNCCD	 Partially, there are not Focal Points but there is a Gender Caucus	 Gender Equality Policy	 Monitoring of gender parity levels across the convention
UNFCCC	 Gender Team and National Gender & Climate Focal Points	 Gender Action Plan (GAP)	 Gender Participation Indicators

4 As part of the UN Secretariat, UNEP is included in the UN System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP). However, UNEP itself does not have a specific action plan for its own unit. UNEP has action plans regarding gender, but they apply to field policies, not staff members.

5 Although there are reports on the gender implementation of the Strategy, they do not include numeric indicators.

1. Internal gender governance: from policy statements to institutional structures

Across organizations, most have established some form of strategy or action plan to mainstream gender equality, although the scope and authority of these frameworks vary.

- **UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD, GEF, GCF, and IPCC** have formal gender strategies or action plans guiding their internal and programmatic work.
- **UNEP**, though part of the UN Secretariat, follows the broader UN-SWAP framework rather than maintaining a dedicated internal gender plan.

Designated gender focal points or units exist in many institutions, such as the CBD's global network of Gender and Biodiversity focal points, the GEF's Gender Partnership, UNEP's Gender and Safeguards Unit, and the UNFCCC's Gender Team. These structures help keep gender considerations visible in institutional processes.

However, the degree of authority, staffing, and resourcing behind these mechanisms differs widely, shaping how effectively they influence decision making and gender-responsive implementation of their mandates.

2. Monitoring & evaluation: tracking progress

Only a subset of organizations systematically track and report gender indicators.

The UNFCCC provides the most robust example, publishing annual gender participation data through an accessible database. UNEP contributes to the UN Secretariat's Gender Parity Dashboard, and the UNCCD reports on gender parity across its activities. The CBD publishes qualitative progress reports but without numerical indicators.



In contrast, several organizations, including the GCF, GEF, and IPCC, do not publicly provide gender-disaggregated staffing data, limiting opportunities for transparency and accountability.

3.3 Overall, what the policies reveal

Across climate and environmental institutions, the policy landscape reflects a field in transition: commitments exist, but their depth, consistency, and implementation vary significantly. While recruitment and anti-harassment frameworks are widespread, fewer institutions have the leadership development pathways, monitoring systems, and accountability mechanisms needed to meaningfully shift gender imbalances in decision making.

In other words: the rules of the game are changing, but not yet fast enough to dismantle the structural barriers women face in accessing power within global climate governance. The data from Section 1 underscores this.

4. What this Means for Climate Governance: Toward more Inclusive Leadership

The evidence presented in this spotlight makes one point unmistakably clear: women have played and continue to play essential roles across global climate governance, yet they remain significantly underrepresented in the spaces where the highest-level decisions are shaped. Despite incremental progress, especially within the CBD and in specific organizational leadership structures, gender parity is far from a reality across COP processes, focal point systems, and multilateral environmental institutions.

Three overarching insights emerge from the combined data and policy review. First, representation decreases as influence increases. Women are widely present as gender focal points, that is, roles that support, inform, and advise, but remain scarce in national focal point positions, bureau leadership, heads of delegation, and COP presidencies. This horizontal and vertical segregation limits the diversity of perspectives in decision making and also the ability of gender expertise to influence broader institutional agendas.

Second, disparities across regions and institutions reveal that progress is neither uniform nor automatic. Some conventions, such as the CBD, have moved toward parity, demonstrating that change is possible. Others continue to lag, with the UNFCCC and UNCCD displaying persistent gender

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imbalances in key leadership roles. Regional gaps remain stark, particularly for women from Africa and Asia-Pacific, who face both gendered and geopolitical barriers to accessing power in global climate diplomacy.

Third, internal institutional policies, which range from hiring and promotion to flexible work and harassment protections, directly shape who enters, stays, and rises within these organizations. While many institutions have adopted gender strategies and inclusive HR frameworks, implementation remains uneven. Few organizations provide structured leadership pathways for women, and even fewer publish gender-disaggregated staffing data. The absence of transparent monitoring undermines accountability and slows progress. However, the recently adopted UNFCCC Gender Action Plan (GAP), shows that important progress on women's full, equal, and meaningful participation and leadership in climate decision-making continues to take place. If accompanied by national ownership, strong accountability, and the means of implementation necessary to carry out its ambitious goals, this long-term plan may represent a significant step towards more gender-equal climate governance.

These findings underscore the need for a renewed and systemic approach to gender equality in climate and environmental governance, one that moves beyond commitments toward consistent institutional practice. As the climate and environmental crisis intensifies, producing increasingly severe, interconnected, and uneven impacts, the exclusion of women from leadership and decision making represents an equity failure and also a governance risk. Ensuring women's full and equal participation is essential to the legitimacy, effectiveness, and responsiveness of climate institutions. It requires not only increasing their presence at the multilateral level but also transforming the systems, structures and institutional culture that determine who is recruited, mentored, promoted, and recognized as a leader.



The evolution of COPs, climate negotiations, and climate action more broadly will depend on the extent to which they become genuinely inclusive spaces of decision making. Addressing climate change and its cascading impacts will not be possible without fully integrating women's capacities, knowledge, and leadership into these processes. This applies not only at the global level, but also across regional and local contexts, where many of the most critical implementation decisions are made. Ensuring that women are not only present but actively shaping agendas and outcomes is therefore not a matter of representation alone, but a prerequisite for effective, just, and sustainable climate governance in the years to come.

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