

Ecofeminism, Climate Justice, and Women's Leadership in South Asia

Garima Bista 

Advocate

Article Info.

Corresponding Author

Garima Bista

Email

garimabista108@gmail.com

Article History

Received: 18 May 2026

Accepted: 2 July 2026

Published: 31 July 2026

How to Cite this Article

Bista, G. (2026). Ecofeminism, Climate Justice, and Women's Leadership in South Asia. *The Informal: South Asian Journal of Human Rights and Social Justice*, 3(1), 61-73.

Abstract

Climate Change is not only an environmental crisis but also a profound social and political challenge that disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly women in the Global South. Existing inequalities based on gender, resource access, political participation, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity affect women's vulnerability to climate impacts while constraining their adaptive capacities. At the same time, women continue to play critical roles in environmental protection, community resilience, and sustainable resource management despite their limited inclusion in formal climate governance and decision-making processes. This article draws on feminist and ecofeminist perspectives and employs a qualitative comparative analysis of secondary literature, policy documents, and regional case studies to examine how climate vulnerability is produced and reinforced by structural inequalities, including unequal land ownership, gendered divisions of labour, and the underrepresentation of women in political institutions. The study analyses the gap between policy commitments to gender inclusion and the persistent limitations on women's substantive participation in climate governance using examples from countries, including Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The article argues that achieving climate justice in South Asia requires not only gender-sensitive policies but also broader structural transformation, meaningful political representation, gender-responsive institutions, and stronger accountability mechanisms that move beyond symbolic inclusion and towards genuine decision-making power.

Keywords: climate change; climate justice; gendered vulnerability; ecofeminism; south asia

Introduction

Climate change is increasingly recognized not only as an environmental crisis but also as a deeply social and political phenomenon that reshapes existing patterns of inequality within and across societies (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). In South Asia, one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, the impacts of

climate change are intensified by pre-existing structural inequalities, particularly those related to gender, class, caste, and geography (World Bank, 2021). While climate-related hazards affect entire populations, their consequences are unevenly distributed, with women, especially those living in poverty and rural areas, being disproportionate vulnerable due to their social roles, economic

marginalization, and limited access to resources and decision-making roles (UN Women, 2020).

This paper is situated within the broader conceptual framework of gendered political ecology and intersectional climate justice, which understands environmental change as inseparable from systems of power that shape access to resources, governance structures, and adaptive capacity (Kajiser & Kronsell, 2014). It draws on feminist political economy and ecofeminist perspectives to examine how gendered divisions of labor, unequal access to resources, and institutional exclusions shape both exposure to climate risks and the ability to adapt to them (Shiva & Mies, 1993). In doing so, it challenges dominant climate governance approaches that treat gender as a peripheral policy consideration rather than a central analytical category for understanding climate vulnerability and governance failures in South Asia.

The central argument of this paper is that despite the formal commitments to gender equality and affirmative action mechanisms across South Asian political systems, women's participation in climate governance often remains largely symbolic rather than substantive. This gap is not simply a matter of representation but reflects deeper structural constraints embedded within electoral systems, party politics, institutional design, and socio-economic hierarchies (Hamilton et al., 2024). Furthermore, the paper argues that climate vulnerability cannot be understood in isolation from these governance deficits, as the exclusion of women from decision-making processes directly weakens the effectiveness, equity, and responsiveness of climate adaptation policies (IPCC, 2022). At the same time, the paper highlights that women are not merely passive victims of climate change but active agents of environmental governance, whose contributions are often most visible at the community level yet least recognized within formal political institutions (Agrawal, 2010).

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, comparative analytical approach based on secondary sources, including academic literature,

policy documents, international organizational reports, and regional case studies. This approach is appropriate because it allows comparative examination of structural patterns in gender and climate governance while integrating theoretical and empirical insights from diverse national contexts. Comparative analysis across countries, including Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, helps identify both shared regional trends and context-specific differences in representation, policy design, and implementation. The inclusion of case-based evidence, such as community forest governance in Nepal, further illustrates how gendered participation and climate governance operate in practice.

Overall, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between gender, climate vulnerability, and governance by examining how structural inequalities shape both exposure to climate change and access to political power in South Asia. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on climate justice by emphasizing that meaningful climate action requires not only technical interventions but also transformative changes in political inclusion, institutional accountability, and the distribution of decision-making power.

Gender, Poverty, and Climate Change

People living in poverty are often disproportionately affected by the repercussions of climate change despite contributing the least to global greenhouse gas emissions (Singh, 2015). Climate-related hazards, including both slow-onset environmental changes and extreme weather events, directly affect the poor through adverse impacts on livelihoods, including reductions and losses in agricultural productivity, adverse impacts on human health and food security, the destruction of homes and infrastructure, and the loss of income and employment opportunities (Hellegatte et al., 2015; Boutin & Smith, 2016). These negative impacts are particularly severe for vulnerable or marginalized populations, often generating “residual impacts residual risks” that persist long after the immediate effects of climate-related events have subsided (Warner & Geest, 2013; James et. al., 2014; Boyd et al., 2017).

Women constitute roughly 70 percent of the world's poor, a disproportionate representation driven by intersecting structural, economic, and gender-specific vulnerabilities (Aliyeva, 2025). Across many societies, women are often overrepresented in informal and precarious forms of employment that are characterized by low wages, limited job security, and inadequate social protection. In addition, women bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care and reproductive labor, including responsibilities associated with pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, menstruation, and family caregiving. These responsibilities can constrain education, formal employment, and economic opportunities, particularly where healthcare systems and social protection mechanisms are weak.

In many regions, women bear primary responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel for their households. As climate change intensifies resource scarcity, these responsibilities often become more time-consuming and physically demanding, requiring women to travel longer distances and expend greater effort to meet household needs (UN Women, 2025). This heightened exposure to climate-related risks is shaped by intersecting structural factors, including reliance on natural resources for daily survival, gendered divisions of labor, and socially assigned caregiving roles, all of which influence how women experience and respond to climate-related change.

Rural women, especially those from poor and marginalized groups, are often directly dependent on natural resources such as forests, land, and water for their livelihoods and household well-being (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development [ICIMOD], 2021). Consequently, climate-induced changes in environmental conditions can significantly increase women's workloads while simultaneously reducing the availability and productivity of the resources on which they depend. As climate variability intensifies, these already time-intensive responsibilities may become increasingly burdensome and, in some contexts, even life-threatening (Technoserve, 2023).

Academic and policy discussions on gender and climate change have gained momentum over the past decade, reflecting growing recognition of both, the differentiated impacts of climate change and the limited inclusion of women in climate governance and decision-making processes (Ayadi et al., 2021). Within dominant climate change narratives, women are frequently positioned either as passive victims of environmental degradation or as exceptional agents of resilience, and sometimes both simultaneously. Although these perspectives capture important dimensions of women's experiences, they risk reducing women to fixed identities of "victim" or "hero" that obscures their broader political agency. Such framings overlook the fact that women are entitled to participate in climate governance as equal political actors, irrespective of whether they are portrayed as vulnerable or resilient. A climate justice perspective therefore requires moving beyond these simplified representations and recognizing women as rights-holders and decision-makers with legitimate claims to political participation and leadership.

Understanding Women's Climate Vulnerability in South Asia

South Asia and the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region account for a disproportionately high share of global climate-related disasters, with approximately 40 percent of recorded climate-related events occurring within the region (Technoserve, 2023). This landscape features geologically fragile environments, such as high-altitude mountains, river basins, and densely populated coastal floodplains that are vulnerable to erosion, landslides, flash floods, glacial outburst floods, prolonged drought, and saline intrusion (UN Women, 2023). These environmental vulnerabilities intersect with persistent socio-economic inequalities, creating complex patterns of climate risk and uneven adaptive capacity across populations.

Empirical evidence suggests that women in the Global South are likely to experience the adverse effects of climate change more acutely than men due to existing inequalities in access to resources, services, and decision-making

opportunities. At the same time, studies have identified gender differenced consumption patterns and carbon footprints, with men in the Global North generally exhibiting higher levels of carbon-intensive consumption than women (Jonsson, 2011). Despite these differences, a common feature across both diverse geographies, however, is systematic exclusion from formal decision-making institutions, a factor that determines both gender equality and the effectiveness of climate adaptation and environmental governance (Jonsson, 2011).

One factor contributing to this persistent exclusion is the unequal distribution of climate knowledge and information, which constrains women's participation in both decision-making processes and reduces their ability to engage effectively in adaptive planning. For example, Nepal ranked among the top 10 countries most severely affected by climate-related hazards and vulnerabilities in 2024 (Adil et al., 2025). According to the National Climate Survey (2022), a substantially higher proportion of women (74 percent) reported being unaware of climate change impacts compared to men (61.3 percent), reflecting a significant gender gap in access to climate information. As a result, women are less likely to access timely information on adaptation strategies and climate-resilient practices, which can constrain their capacity to respond effectively to climate-related hazards and exacerbate existing socio-economic vulnerabilities.

However, limited access to climate information represents only one dimension of climate vulnerability. Women also face structural inequalities in access to productive assets and economic resources that shape their ability to adapt to climate change. In South Asia, where approximately 70 percent of the population relies directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihoods (International Water Management Institute [IWMI], 2026), gender disparities in access to agricultural technologies such as irrigation systems, mechanized equipment, and climate-resilient inputs contribute to unequal adaptive outcomes. Greater access to these resources enables many male farmers to mitigate some of the adverse effects of climate shocks,

whereas women often experience relatively larger declines in agricultural productivity and income during periods of environmental stress.

Land ownership constitutes another significant dimension of climate vulnerability. Women face substantial barriers in accessing and controlling land across South Asia despite their extensive involvement in agricultural production (Islam, et al., 2024; Union of International Associations [UIA], 2022). Climate change disproportionately affects sectors in which women play central economic roles, such as paddy farming, tea and cotton cultivation, and small-scale fisheries, thereby intensifying both livelihood insecurity and unpaid labor burdens (Parikh, 2003). In the absence of secure land tenure, women farmers face persistent uncertainty that limits their ability to make long-term investments in land productivity, adopt climate-resilient agricultural practices (Roberts, 2021) or access formal credit and agricultural support services (Islam et al., 2024).

These challenges are particularly evident in Nepal. According to the Nepal Labor Survey 2017/18, approximately 61 percent of women are involved in subsistence agriculture, compared with only 47 percent of men. Despite their central role in agricultural production, women frequently face barriers in accessing weather and climate information, agricultural extension services, independent sources of income, and credit. Such constraints significantly reduce their adaptive capacity and increase their exposure to climate-related risks.

These vulnerabilities are not merely the result of environmental exposure but are produced and reinforced through unequal social relations, governance structures, and distributions of political power. Understanding climate vulnerability in South Asia, therefore, requires assessments of risk to examine how gendered inequalities shape access to resources, adaptive capacity, and participation in decision-making processes. This perspective provides an essential foundation for understanding the relationship between climate justice, women's leadership, and inclusive climate governance in the region.

Ecofeminism and Women's Role in Environmental Justice

Early theoretical frameworks attempting to unpack the relationship between environmental degradation and gender inequality often draw upon ecofeminism. The French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne, coined the term 'Eco-feminism' in 1974 to describe the interconnected struggles against the domination of women and the exploitation of nature (Hosseinnezhad, 2017). Emerging from environmental and feminist movements, ecofeminism continued to develop in the 1980s as radical eco-feminists linked the ways in which patriarchal systems construct women and nature with adjustable power and encouraged their exploitation for economic labor and resources (Imran and Chen 2020; Miles 2018).

Ecofeminism explains that the connection between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature is rooted in similar structures of domination, arguing that patriarchal societies have historically associated women with nature and men with culture and dominance (Rosendo & Kuhnen, 2021), thereby legitimizing both, environmental exploitation and gender inequality. From this perspective, environmental destruction and social injustice are mutually reinforcing processes. Ecofeminist theory, therefore, criticizes both patriarchy and capitalism for perpetuating gender inequality, social exclusion, and ecological destruction, while advocating for an equitable, inclusive, and ecologically sustainable approach to development (Rowland, 2015).

Ecofeminist thought is particularly relevant in the context of climate change. Environmental challenges such as water scarcity, pollution, deforestation, and drought disproportionately affect women, especially in rural and resource-constrained communities (Mani, 2026). Since women are often responsible for securing water, fuel, and food for managing the household, environmental degradation directly increases their workloads, undermines their livelihoods and affects their health and well-being. Ecofeminists believe that women's knowledge, lived experiences, and proximity to natural resources equips them with valuable ecological knowledge and practical

experience that can contribute to environmental conservation, climate adaptation, and sustainable resource management.

Climate-related disasters further expose the gendered dimensions of environmental vulnerability. During and after disasters, girls and women often face heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly in emergency shelters, which are frequently overcrowded, unfamiliar, unsafe, and lack privacy. These risks are exacerbated when humanitarian aid fails to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches or provide adequate support. Marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals, may face additional barriers to accessing emergency services and protection during climate-related crises.

Research from South Asia demonstrates how climate-related disasters can intensify existing gender inequalities. In countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, climate-related weather disasters have been linked to increased school dropout rates among girls and higher incidents of child and forced marriage (Johnson, 2022). Similarly, women in rural communities in Nepal are more vulnerable to changes brought by climate change due to their dependence on natural resources and restricted participation in decision-making processes (Bhattarai, 2020). These patterns illustrate that climate change does not affect populations equally, but instead amplifies pre-existing structural inequalities, particularly gendered vulnerabilities rooted in limited access to resources, education, and decision-making power.

Due to this, many ecofeminist perspectives advocate for leadership by those communities most directly affected by environmental degradation, especially indigenous and marginalized women. Their close relationship with the local ecosystem has not only increased their exposure to their vulnerability to environmental degradation but has also provided them with valuable ecological knowledge and experience that can contribute to conservation, climate adaptation, and sustainable environmental practices.

This structural connection between women's leadership and environmental justice

is reflected in several environmental movements across South Asia. In India, the Bishnoi Movement in Rajasthan is frequently cited as an early historic resistance against deforestation through the sacrifice of community members who protected trees from destruction (Suresh & Kattimani, 2015). The movement helped protect forests from indiscriminate exploitation, thereby protecting ecosystem services that support biodiversity, water regulation, and long-term ecological resilience. Similarly, the Chipko-inspired Appiko Movement in Karnataka involved rural communities, including large numbers of women, to prevent deforestation through non-violent means (Suresh & Kattimani, 2015). Besides conserving forests, the movement demonstrated the importance of sustainable use of resources through the protection of ecosystems that provide livelihoods for the local population and increase communities' capacity to deal with environmental change. Indigenous women in Odisha have long practiced in *Thengapalli*, a community-based forest protection system involving collective monitoring and conservation of local forests (Suresh & Kattimani, 2015). It is a model of sustainable natural resource governance through participatory management of forest resources, ensuring the availability of forest products in the long term and increasing community resilience. Women also played significant roles in the Silent Valley Movement in Kerala, which successfully opposed the construction of a hydroelectric project that threatened ecologically sensitive forest areas (Suresh & Kattimani, 2015). Conservation of this ecosystem protected biodiversity and functions of watershed critical for long-term ecological stability and climate resilience. Likewise, the Navdanya Movement, founded by Vandana Shiva, has empowered thousands of women farmers to engage in biodiversity conservation and the preservation of indigenous seed systems (Suresh & Kattimani, 2015). The movement has increased farmers' adaptive capacity to climate variability and strengthened sustainable management of agricultural resources by promoting seed sovereignty, agro-biodiversity, and ecological farming practices. The Jungle Bachao Andolan further highlighted the role of tribal communities, including women activists, in resisting commercial

exploitation of forests and defending traditional environmental rights (Suresh & Kattimani, 2015).

Likewise, in Pakistan, environmental activist Aisha Khan has been a prominent advocate against deforestation and environmental degradation in Chilas, working closely with civil society organizations and environmental institutions (Ahmad, 2020). Similarly, the country's climate activism efforts have coincided with policy responses on environmental issues, including restrictions on plastic bags. The provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) introduced a ban on plastic bags, and similar measures have been considered in Punjab and Sindh (DAWN, 2014). Pakistani female university students have also actively contributed to climate awareness initiatives through the Global Youth Climate Strike movement, using their platforms to advocate for environmental protection and healthier urban living conditions (Ahmed et al., 2020).

These examples suggest that while women's participation in environmental movements is visible and often central to grassroots action, it does not automatically translate into sustained influence within formal decision-making structures. Instead, women's contributions are frequently acknowledged during moments of crisis or activism but remain unevenly integrated into long-term environmental governance. This highlights a persistent gap between participation and genuine policy-level power.

The Gender Gap in South Asian Climate Governance

South Asia remains one of the most food-insecure and water-stressed regions in the world, characterized by historically rooted social hierarchies and persistent gender inequalities. Across the region and the HKH, gender relations, women's socio-economic status, and experiences have been shaped by historical and political events, including nationalist movements, democratization, ethnic conflict, religious fundamentalism, communism, identity politics, and women's movements, along with urbanization, globalization, commercialization, technological revolution, and

infrastructure development (ICIMOD, 2022).

Despite these transformations, women’s access to leadership and decision-making roles within climate governance remains limited. Governments across South Asia have adopted a wide range of policies, strategies, and action plans focused on promoting gender inclusion, and research consistently shows that women’s involvement in decision-making leads to more effective, inclusive, and sustainable climate policies. Women’s lived experiences, local ecological knowledge, and community engagement often generate adaptation strategies that are responsive to local needs and environmental realities (Nagel, 2015; Patel et al., 2019). UNDP (2024) similarly identifies a strong correlation between women’s participation in policymaking and the effectiveness of climate adaptation plans and resilience initiatives.

Recent parliamentary elections data show significant disparities in women’s political representation across South Asia. Although all countries in the region have adopted democratic institutions and various mechanisms to promote inclusion, women remain significantly underrepresented in the national legislature. Nepal records the highest proportion of women parliamentarians among the abovementioned countries, with 34.9 percent (96 of 275) of seats in the House of Representatives. However, representation remains considerably lower in Pakistan with 21.7 percent (72 of 332) of seats, India with 13.6 percent (74 of 543) of seats, Sri Lanka with 9.8 percent (22 of 225) of seats, and

Bangladesh with 2.4 percent (7 of 296) of seats (Table 1). No country has achieved parity in legislative representation.

These disparities are partly shaped by differences in electoral systems. India follows primarily on a First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system, while Sri Lanka operates a proportional representation model through multi-member districts. Nepal adopts a mixed electoral system that combines FPTP and proportional representation alongside constitutional provisions designed to promote the inclusion of marginalized groups. Pakistan and Bangladesh adopt hybrid arrangements in which general seats are elected through FPTP systems while reserved seats for women and minorities are allocated proportionally to political parties. These institutional variations in electoral design have important implications for representation, particularly for women and other marginalized groups, as they influence the extent to which formal commitments to inclusion are translated into substantive political representation.

Nevertheless, even where women achieve representation within national legislatures, their influence within climate governance structures remain limited. Research consistently shows that women’s participation in climate-related decision-making is often symbolic rather than substantive, with women frequently excluded from key leadership positions within environmental ministries, climate negotiations, technical committees, and policy implementation bodies (Jayaram, 2017; Paudel, 2025). Studies across South

Table 1: Women Members of Parliament in National Legislatures in South Asia (Most Recent Elections)

Country	Legislative Body (Year)	Total Seats	Women MPs	Percentage (%)
Nepal	House of Representatives (HoR), 2026	275	96	34.9%
India	Lok Sabha, 2024	543	74	13.6%
Pakistan	National Assembly, 2024	332	72	21.7%
Sri Lanka	Parliament, 2024	225	22	9.8%
Bangladesh	Jatiya Sangsad, 2024	296	7	2.4%

Source: Election Commission Nepal; compiled by the author using official data from the respective national election commissions, parliamentary websites, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The percentage of women MPs and other comparative statistics were calculated by the author based on the reported figures.

Asia further emphasize that women's perspectives remain underrepresented in the design, negotiation, implementation, and evaluation of climate policies despite the disproportionate impacts of climate change on their lives and livelihoods (Paudel, 2025).

This disconnect underscores a broader challenge within climate governance. Those most affected by climate change often possess the least influence over policies intended to address it. As a result, climate governance across South Asian countries is shaped predominantly within male-dominated institutional spaces, while the experiences, knowledge, and leadership of women, especially rural, indigenous, and marginalized women, remain insufficiently incorporated in formal governance systems. Therefore, addressing this gap is not only a matter of gender equality but also a prerequisite for achieving more effective, inclusive, and just climate governance across the region.

At the regional level, South Asian countries have recognized the importance of cooperative approaches to climate governance through initiatives under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change (2008–2011) emphasized collaboration on adaptation, mitigation, technology transfer, capacity-building, and knowledge sharing to address common climate challenges (SAARC, 2008). In addition, regional mechanisms such as the SAARC Disaster Management Centre have promoted cooperation in disaster risk reduction and climate resilience—issues particularly significant for vulnerable populations across the region (SAARC, 2016).

Although these initiatives increasingly acknowledge the importance of inclusive and sustainable development, the integration of gender perspectives within climate governance frameworks has remained limited and uneven across member states (UN Women, 2023). Consequently, while regional commitments provide an important foundation for cooperation, the meaningful inclusion of women in climate governance continues to depend largely on national political and institutional arrangements.

Gender Quotas and Representation Gaps in South Asia

A clearer and more concrete illustration of the gap between participation and influence can be drawn from Nepal's forest governance system. Women constitute a significant proportion of members within Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), where they actively contribute to forest conservation, fuelwood management, biodiversity protection, and local climate adaptation practices. However, empirical studies on CFUG governance consistently show that, despite this strong participation, women remain underrepresented in key executive positions within the body such as chairpersons or committee leaders, and their influence over strategic decision-making remains limited (Pandey & Pokhrel, 2021). Moreover, women's participation tends to further diminish as governance shifts from community-level institutions to district, provincial, and national decision-making structures.

Similar patterns are evident across South Asia. In Pakistan, community-based natural resource management initiatives such as social forestry programs and water user associations show women actively engaged in agricultural and environmental management activities, particularly in tree plantation, fuelwood collection, and climate adaptation practices. However, executive and decision-making positions within local committees and decision-making bodies remain predominantly male-dominated (Muhammad, 2021). Likewise, in Bangladesh, women play important roles in social forestry initiatives and community-based climate resilience programs, contributing significantly to plantation management, resource conservation, and disaster preparedness activities. Yet, leadership positions within these governance structures remain concentrated among men and local elites, limiting women's ability to influence policy priorities and resource allocation (Ahmed & Laarman, 2000).

These patterns reflect a broader regional challenge. Although most South Asian countries have formally committed to promoting women's participation in political decision-making through constitutional guarantees, legal provisions and electoral reforms - these commitments have

not consistently translated into substantive representation, which has been illustrated below. Countries including Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have introduced a range of affirmative action measures to enhance women's political participation, including reserved seats, proportional representation mechanisms, and constitutional provisions promoting inclusion.

For instance, Article 85(8) and Article 176(9) of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 mandates at least one-third representation of women in federal and provincial legislatures through a mixed electoral system designed to promote inclusiveness and proportional representation. Pakistan reserves seats for women in the National Assembly through proportional allocation among political parties (Free and Fair Election Network, 2023), while Bangladesh maintains constitutionally reserved parliamentary seats for women distributed among parties based on their electoral performance (IFES, 2020). India has recently enacted legislation reserving one-third of seats for women in Lok Sabha and state assemblies (Mehrotra, 2026), although implementation remains contingent upon future delimitation processes. Sri Lanka, by contrast, has primarily introduced gender quotas mainly at the local government level rather than in the national parliament, reflecting a more limited scope of enforceable representation (Siddique, 2025).

Despite these formal commitments, women's representation in political leadership remains comparatively low across all five countries. Quotas are often implemented in ways that are indirect, delayed, or mediated by party structures, limiting women's ability to enter decision-making roles independently. As a result, while gender inclusion has been embedded in constitutional and electoral frameworks, women continue to face significant barriers to meaningful engagement in decision-making processes. This gap between descriptive representation and substantive political influence is particularly significant in the context of climate governance, where policies addressing environmental sustainability, adaptation, and resilience continue to be formulated predominantly within male-dominated institutional structures.

Way Forward

Gender-responsive climate governance is not merely about increasing women's participation within existing systems, but is rather about restructuring institutional arrangements, power relations, and knowledge hierarchies that continue to shape climate decision-making across South Asia. The following policy directions therefore outline mechanisms through which this structural transformation can be advanced across political, institutional, and community spheres.

A meaningful way forward begins with acknowledging a structural reality: legal and policy commitments to gender equality in South Asia's political systems already exist in multiple forms, but they are often designed to tokenize compliance without transformation. The priority, therefore, is not simply to "add women" into existing systems, but to reconfigure the conditions under which political participation, representation, and leadership are produced and sustained.

First, affirmative action mechanisms must move beyond numerical presence toward substantive political power. While quotas and reserved seats have expanded women's entry into legislatures, they often channel women into constrained roles or depend heavily on party gatekeeping. A stronger approach requires reforms that ensure women are systematically placed in decision-making positions such as committee leaderships, budgetary bodies, and climate-relevant ministries. This also demands internal party reforms, particularly transparent and enforceable rules on candidate nomination, making sure that women are not treated as symbolic or secondary candidates in electoral competition.

Second, representation must be anchored in institutional systems that value and integrate gender-responsive knowledge. This includes embedding GEDSI-responsive data collection, gender-budgeting, and intersectional analysis into climate governance processes at every level of decision-making. Without such systems, women's participation risks remaining descriptive rather than transformative, as their experiences are neither consistently documented nor translated into policy

design. Strengthening parliamentary research units, climate advisory bodies, and planning institutions with dedicated gender expertise is therefore essential for close the gap between participation and influence.

Beyond improving institutional knowledge systems, climate governance must also address the intersectional nature of vulnerability. Women are not a homogeneous category, and experiences of climate impacts and political exclusion vary significantly according to class, caste, ethnicity, indigeneity, disability, age, and geographic location. Policies that treat women as a single group risk reproducing intersectional inequalities by privileging those already relatively advantaged. A more inclusive approach requires intersectional policy design, disaggregated data collection, and targeted measures that recognize the specific barriers faced by marginalized groups of women. Sustained investments in capacity-building through leadership training, technical support, climate literacy initiatives, and mentorship opportunities can transform formal opportunities for participation into meaningful influence over policy outcomes.

Third, institutional architecture must be intentionally empowered rather than merely established. Many South Asian countries already have gender focal points, commissions, or coordination mechanisms, but these often lack autonomy, resources, or decision-making authority. A credible way forward requires guaranteeing stable financing, professional staffing, and clear mandates that allow these bodies to influence core policy processes rather than operate on the margins. It is also important to integrate gender accountability into climate governance frameworks, ensuring ministries and agencies are evaluated not only on climate outcomes but also on equity outcomes.

Equally important is the strengthening of community-level leadership pathways that enable women to move from local participation to formal political influence. Evidence from Nepal's CFUGs demonstrates that local resource governance institutions can serve as important spaces for developing women's leadership skills, decision-making experience, and collective

agency. For example, in Dadeldhura District, 49 Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) are led by women, while approximately 511 women serve as executive committee members, reflecting women's substantial participation in local forest governance (RECOFTC, 2018). While participation in community-based institutions does not automatically translate into political representation, these platforms can function as critical entry points for leadership development. This means that policies should be in place to support women's leadership within local climate adaptation committees, forest user groups, water management bodies, and other community institutions, creating clearer pathways between grassroots engagement and higher levels of governance.

Given the transboundary nature of climate change and the shared challenges facing South Asian countries, regional cooperation must also form part of the way forward. Regional alliances such as the SAARC, as well as emerging regional climate justice and adaptation networks, provide opportunities for exchanging good practices, developing common standards, and strengthening women's leadership in climate governance. Regional cooperation can facilitate knowledge-sharing on gender-responsive climate policies, support cross-border learning among women leaders, and encourage greater policy harmonization on issues of climate adaptation and social inclusion. Such collaboration is particularly valuable in a region where many climate risks and governance challenges transcend national boundaries.

Finally, the persistence of weak implementation highlights the need for stronger accountability ecosystems that connect policy commitments to political consequences. This means creating enforceable monitoring systems, parliamentary scrutiny mechanisms, and civil society oversight structures that can track whether gender commitments in climate governance are being met in practice. In the absence of such accountability, gender equality risks remaining a rhetorical commitment rather than an operational principle. Closing the gap between .

References

- Agrawal, B. (1992). The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India. *Feminist Studies*, 18(1), 119-158. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178217>
- Agrawal, B. (2010). *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199569687.001.0001>
- Ahmed, M. R., & Laarman, J. G. (2000). Gender equity in social forestry programs in Bangladesh. *Human Ecology*, 28(3), 433–450. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4603361>
- Aliyeva, S. (2025). Gender and Climate Change, *Proceedings of the Contribution of Culture to Ecological Sustainability*, 49-58. Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-468-6_4
- Bhattarai, S. (2020, February 28). Nepali women doubly burdened by climate change. *Nepali Times*. <https://nepalitimes.com/nepali-women-doubly-burdened-by-climate-change-e352519u>
- Chinsya, B. (2024). Women and Nature: An Ecofeminist Study on Environmental Conservation Sustainability. *An-Nisa Journal of Gender Studies*, 17(2). <https://doi.org/10.35719/annisa.v17i2.309>
- Connolly-Boutin, L. and Smit, B. (2016). Climate Change, Food Security, and Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Regional Environmental Change*, 16(2), 385-399. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-015-0761-x>
- Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential. (2023). Subsistence agriculture income level in rural communities. <https://encyclopedia.uia.org/problem/subsistence-agricultural-income-level-rural-communities>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2017). *The State of Food and Agriculture*. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/7468fe06-7dd7-4e7a-8f10-bb0084594977/content>
- Geest, K. (2018). Landslide Loss and Damage in Sindhupalchok District, Nepal: Comparing Income Groups with Implications for Compensation and Relief. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, 9(3-4), 157-166. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13753-018-0178-5>
- Haq, Z. A., Imran, M., Ahmad, S., & Farooq, U. (2020). Environment, Islam, and women: a study of eco-feminist environmental activism in Pakistan. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, 23(3), 275–291. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42322-020-00065-4>
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>
- International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. (2022). *State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in South Asia and the Hindu Kush Himalaya*. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/state-of-ge-and-cc-in-sa-and-hkh-2d933.pdf>
- Islam, M.M., Jannat, A. & Al Rafi, D.A. (2024). Women participation in South Asian agriculture: a comprehensive systematic review. *Discover Sustainability*, 5, 490 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-024-00649-w>
- Jayaram, D. (2017). Women's role in climate diplomacy in South Asia. *Climate Diplomacy*. <https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/cooperation/womens-role-climate-diplomacy-south-asia>
- Johnson, O. (2022). A Woman's Place is in Resistance: An Ecofeminist Response to Climate Change. *Fordham Research Commons*. https://research.library.fordham.edu/environ_2015/128

- Jonsson, S. (2011). Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 21(2), 744-751. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.01.005>
- Kaijser, A., Kronsell, A. (2013). Climate change through the lens of intersectionality. *Environmental Politics*, 23(3), 417-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.835203>
- Mani, S. (2026). Intersectional Ecofeminism: Understanding the Double Burden of Gender and Environmental Injustice. *International Journal of Economic Practices and Theories*, 1012-1020. <https://doi.org/10.52783/ijept.243>
- Mehrotra, S. (2026). *Why 651 and not 816 is the right number*. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/implementing-womens-reservation-hybrid-lok-sabha-expansion-651-seats/article70858438.ece>
- Mies, Maria., Shiva, V. (1997). Ecofeminism. *Halifax, Nova Scotia: Frenwood Publications*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175296>
- Muhammad, B., et al. (2021). Analysis of Women's Participation in Forest Management in Malakand Division. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)*, 117-126. <https://pjsel.jehanf.com/index.php/journal/article/view/585/434>
- Narula, S. (2008). The Story of Narmada Bachao Andolan: Human Rights in the Global Economy and the Struggle Against the World Bank. *Public Law & Legal Theory Research Paper Series*, 08(62). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1315459>
- Pandey, H., & Pokhrel, N. (2021). Formation trend analysis and gender inclusion in community forests of Nepal. *Trees Forests and People*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tfp.2021.100106>
- Rai, A., Ayadi, D. P., Shrestha, B., & Mishra, A. (2021). On the realities of gender inclusion in climate change policies in Nepal. *Policy Design and Practice*, 4(4), 501-516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2021.1935643>
- Roberts, B. (2021). Securing Women's Land Rights: Challenges and Solutions. <https://tenuresecurity.org/securing-womens-land-rights-challenges-and-solutions/>
- Rocheleau, D. (1966). Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 4(1), 21-24. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v4i1.21378>
- Rosendo, D., & Kuhen, T. (2021). Ecofeminism. *Gender Equality*, 191-202. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95687-9_41
- Shrivastava, P., & Tharkal, M. (2025). Case Comment on Narmada Bachado Andolan vs Union of India and Ors AIR 2000 SC 3275. *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities*, 8(2), 938-946. <https://ijlmh.com/wp-content/uploads/Case-Comment-on-Narmada-Bachao-Andolan-vs-Union-of-India-and-Ors-AIR-2000-SC-3751.pdf>
- Siddique, N. (2025). Women's Electoral Participation in Local Government in Bangladesh: A Case Study. *Social Science Review*, 3(3). <https://ssr.gstu.edu.bd/page12.html>
- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (2008). *SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change*. https://thimaaveshi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/saarc_action_plan.pdf
- Suresh, B., & Kattimani, B. (2015). *Environmental Movements by Women*. Anu Books. https://anubooks.com/uploads/session_pdf/16623758598.pdf
- TechnoServe (2026). 5 Ways Climate Change Disproportionately Impacts Women. <https://www.technoserve.org/blog/5-climate-change-impacts-women/>
- Thomas Reuters Foundation News (2015, May 25). Solving the climate crisis means tackling global inequality. <https://news.trust.org/item/20150525141853-ld051/>

- True, J., & Mintrom, M. (2001). Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming. *International Studies Quarterly*, 45(1), 27–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3096100>
- UN Women. (2020). *The World for Women and Girls-Annual Report 2019-2020*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/annual-report-2019-2020>
- UN Women. (2025). *How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected>
- United Nations Development Programme. (2024). *United Nations Development Programme Annual Report 2024*. <https://www.undp.org/publications/undp-annual-report-2024>
- World Bank (2021). *World Development Report 2021*. <https://wdr2021.worldbank.org/>
- Yusen, L., et al. (2025). Impact of Climate Change on Women in South Asia: A Need for Immediate Legislation. *International Journal of Environmental Science*, 11, 631-638. <https://doi.org/10.64252/sphx5c18>

