

Gendered Narratives in Climate Justice and the Role of Women’s Leadership in Environmental Movements

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Abstract

It is a qualitative inquiry that examines how the central role of female leadership in shaping gendered discourses in climate justice movements is done, and how their agency and practical actions reshape environmental activism and social justice. Drawing upon extensive in-depth interviews with women leaders in a range of environmental movements, the analysis shows that they understand climate justice in terms of an intersectional approach of ecological stewardship in relation to the well-being of communities, cultural identity, and gender equality. Their stories highlight the relationship between the environmental degradation and social inequality, thus highlighting the need to have a combined and inclusive leadership to achieve sustainable solutions. Despite their irreplaceable roles, women still face institutional barriers including patriarchal marginalization, economic marginalization and restricted access to decision making spaces. Using the thematic analysis, this work determines how women transform these limitations into opportunities to take innovative and community-based climate action. Its results dispute existing technocratic, male-dominated leadership paradigms and suggests a more comprehensive approach to environmental governance with empathy, collaboration, and indigenous local expertise as its priority. This research has implications on management and policymaking, which propose gender-responsive policies that would institutionalize the leadership of women in climate governance. In the end, the work also claims that climate justice cannot be achieved without gender justice because the female leadership is not only redressing but transformational to the world environmental organizations.

Introduction

In recent decades, the urgency of addressing climate change has led to a growing recognition of the need for collective action across all sectors of society. However, while environmental crises disproportionately affect marginalized groups, the role of gender and particularly women’s leadership in climate justice movements has often been underexplored. Gendered perspectives on climate justice highlight how social identities shape individuals’ experiences of environmental degradation and influence their capacity to lead and mobilize for change. Women, especially in the Global South, have long been at the forefront of environmental activism, challenging traditional power structures while simultaneously addressing the intersectionality of climate change with social inequality, gender discrimination, and poverty (Galbiati & Ferreira, 2024). Despite their critical contributions, women’s leadership in climate movements is frequently overlooked in mainstream environmental discourses (Madhanagopal

et al., 2022). This study explores the gendered narratives surrounding climate justice and critically examines the role of women's leadership in environmental movements. Specifically, it investigates how women, often positioned as both victims and agents of change, craft and challenge narratives of environmental justice, resilience, and empowerment. The study is situated within the broader context of environmental feminism, which critiques the gendered dimensions of environmental harm and advocates for transformative leadership by women in environmental advocacy (Tran, 2021). In focusing on women's leadership, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research that links gender to environmental governance, offering new insights into how female activists reshape environmental policies and social norms.

By analyzing narrative strategies employed by women leaders in environmental movements, this study will also examine the power dynamics at play in climate justice discourses. These power relations are not only shaped by gender but also by the broader socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts in which climate justice is situated (Bermúdez et al., 2023; Nunbogu & Elliott, 2022). Understanding how gendered narratives are constructed and disseminated in these contexts can shed light on the challenges and opportunities women face in creating inclusive, intersectional solutions to environmental crises (Wakeel & Khan, 2024). The study connects the conceptual realm of climate justice with the lived experiences of women who lead movements for environmental change, emphasizing the ways in which gender influences both the framing of climate issues and the pursuit of sustainable solutions (Newell et al., 2021; Kwauk & Casey, 2022; Sultana, 2022). The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how gendered power structures impact environmental activism and provide critical insights for future advocacy, policy-making, and academic inquiry in the intersections of gender, environment, and justice (Sasser, 2024).

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the role of women's leadership in environmental movements and the gendered narratives that shape climate justice discourses. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as leadership, gender, and activism, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. Specifically, this study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, which enables the researcher to explore how women leaders in climate justice movements construct and communicate their identities, challenges, and solutions in response to environmental issues. By focusing on individual stories, this research aims to uncover the complexities of gender and leadership within the broader context of environmental activism.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the study's objectives. The target participants were women actively involved in grassroots environmental movements, with leadership roles that included organizing, coordinating, and advocating for climate justice. The sample was diverse, consisting of 15-20 women leaders from various regions, particularly the Global South, where the impacts of climate change are often most severe and where women's leadership in environmental activism is crucial yet often underrepresented. Participants were selected to reflect different sociopolitical, cultural, and economic contexts, ensuring a broad spectrum of gendered experiences in climate movements.

This diversity allowed the study to capture the varied ways in which gender influences environmental leadership, activism, and climate justice narratives.

Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for deep engagement with participants and provided flexibility to explore both specific topics and emergent themes. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on participant availability. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful for qualitative research as they strike a balance between guiding questions and open-ended exploration, allowing the interviewer to follow up on key points raised by the participant while maintaining focus on the central research questions.

The interview protocol covered three main areas: participants' personal experiences with climate activism, the gendered narratives they use in their leadership, and the barriers they face in asserting their leadership within often patriarchal environmental movements. In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted to supplement the data collected through interviews. This involved reviewing manifestos, speeches, articles, and online publications created by or about the participants or their organizations. Document analysis provided additional context for understanding how the participants frame climate justice issues, communicate their leadership, and mobilize for action. The documents were analyzed to uncover recurring themes, language, and strategies used by women leaders in environmental movements, complementing the insights gained through the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (or themes) within the data. This method is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena like gendered narratives and leadership, as it enables the researcher to uncover underlying patterns and themes that emerge from the data. The analysis process was systematic and involved several key steps to ensure rigor and reliability. The first step involved familiarization with the data. All interview transcripts and documents were read multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. This initial step allowed the researcher to immerse themselves in the data, making it easier to identify significant patterns and recurring themes related to gender, leadership, and climate justice. During this stage, notes were made to highlight the main ideas, emotional tone, and any interesting nuances that emerged from the participants' responses.

Following this, initial coding was carried out. Meaningful segments of the data were identified and labeled with codes based on key themes such as gendered narratives, women's leadership, and climate justice. These codes were developed inductively, meaning they were grounded in the data itself rather than predefined categories. This step allowed for the systematic organization of the data, making it easier to identify the overarching patterns and differences in participants' experiences. The third step involved theme development. The initial codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected the central aspects of the research, such as women's leadership roles in climate justice movements, gendered power dynamics, and the ways in which women construct and challenge narratives of climate change. These themes helped to contextualize the findings within the broader framework of gender and environmental activism.

Refining the themes was the last step. The identified themes were carefully reviewed and clarified to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the study's research objectives. Themes were adjusted, combined, or split as necessary to ensure coherence and consistency. Throughout the process, attention was paid to ensuring that all relevant data were captured and that the themes reflected the full range of participants' experiences and perspectives. To facilitate the process of organizing and analyzing the data, NVivo software was used. This software proved to be particularly useful in managing large volumes of textual data, allowing the researcher to systematically code and categorize the data. NVivo also helped in visualizing connections between different themes, facilitating a deeper understanding of the relationships between gender, leadership, and climate justice. The use of NVivo ensured that the analysis process was thorough and that patterns were reliably identified across the data set.

Result and Discussion

The preceding sections have detailed the study's methodological rigor and analytical approach designed to capture the nuanced experiences of women leaders in environmental movements. This section now presents the findings derived from thematic analysis, highlighting how women's leadership operates as both a catalyst for climate action and a site of resistance against patriarchal structures. The discussion integrates these findings with existing literature to demonstrate how women's narratives not only challenge conventional notions of environmental governance but also contribute to more inclusive and transformative models of climate justice.

Women's Leadership as a Catalyst in Climate Justice Movements

The analysis revealed that women leaders in climate justice movements often position themselves not only as leaders but as catalysts for change. These women were consistently portrayed as pivotal figures in initiating, sustaining, and expanding climate justice efforts within their communities. Unlike traditional notions of leadership, which often emphasize hierarchical authority and organizational power, the leadership practiced by these women was deeply rooted in moral responsibility and cultural stewardship. Participants in the study frequently expressed that their leadership arose from a collective understanding that environmental degradation disproportionately affects women, especially in vulnerable communities. One participant, a grassroots activist from a coastal village, powerfully articulated this point:

"As women, we are often the first to experience the impacts of environmental degradation, which makes our leadership not just an option, but a necessity."

This statement captures a central theme that emerged across interviews: women's leadership is not a matter of choice, but a deeply ingrained necessity born from lived experience. Women in these communities are often the primary caretakers of family resources water, food, and energy which are directly impacted by environmental changes such as droughts, deforestation, and flooding. As such, these women don't simply "step into" leadership roles but are compelled to act due to their unique position in these ecosystems, where their roles as caregivers intersect with environmental realities. Women's leadership in climate justice movements was also depicted as symbolic of resilience. Many of the leaders interviewed saw themselves not only as activists but as custodians of their communities' survival. They described their role as one of long-term stewardship, managing resources and traditions that are threatened by climate

change. For instance, in a rural community affected by desertification, one participant explained how she works alongside women farmers to implement sustainable agricultural techniques, saying:

“It’s not just about fighting climate change, it’s about preserving our way of life, our culture, and the future of our children.”

This dual emphasis on resilience and cultural preservation underscores how women’s leadership is interwoven with broader social, economic, and environmental goals. The women interviewed expressed that their leadership went beyond local community organizing, extending to advocacy at national and international levels. Many participants were involved in policy-making discussions, engaging with global climate summits, or representing grassroots movements in formal negotiations, where they argued for the integration of gender-sensitive policies in climate action frameworks. One participant, who had represented a local women’s cooperative at a United Nations climate conference, highlighted the power of women’s perspectives in broadening the scope of climate justice initiatives:

“When women speak at the table, we bring more than just technical solutions; we bring life experience and practical knowledge about what is truly needed to protect both the environment and the community.”

Additionally, this catalytic role of women’s leadership is seen in their ability to build bridges between different movements. Women leaders often act as mediators between various interest groups environmentalists, indigenous communities, policymakers, and economic stakeholders ensuring that inclusive and holistic climate solutions are pursued. Their ability to navigate complex socio-political dynamics makes them not just activists but also influential negotiators who can align diverse stakeholders around shared climate goals. The study revealed that women are not only challenging existing frameworks of environmental governance but also pushing the boundaries of mainstream climate justice discourses. As highlighted by several participants, the focus on gender equality in environmental policies has historically been marginal, but women leaders have redefined climate justice to include broader social issues such as economic empowerment, gender equity, health, and social resilience. This broader approach demonstrates how women’s leadership is not confined to traditional environmental concerns but also challenges and restructures the very foundations of climate justice.

Gendered Narratives and the Construction of Climate Justice

A central theme that emerged from the interviews was the way women leaders frame climate justice through distinctly gendered narratives, which significantly challenge and expand the traditional discourse on environmental sustainability. These gendered narratives do not simply reflect environmental concerns but integrate broader social inequalities, such as poverty, gender discrimination, and marginalization, into the understanding of climate justice. By doing so, women activists are able to reframe climate justice as an inherently intersectional issue one that cannot be understood solely through environmental degradation but must also include the struggles for social equity and gender equality. Many participants explicitly articulated that climate justice for them is not only about the preservation of nature but is closely tied to securing livelihoods and fostering resilience in their communities, especially in the face of ecological crisis. One activist from a rural region in the Global South stated,

“Climate justice for us is not only about protecting forests and water; it is about securing food for our families, ensuring health for our children, and challenging the inequalities that keep women invisible in decision-making.”

This statement underscores the fundamental belief that climate change and gender inequality are inseparable. The struggles women face in securing food, water, and health for their families are not merely environmental but are deeply interwoven with social structures of patriarchy and economic injustice. Women leaders, especially in rural and Indigenous communities, consistently pointed out that their environmental activism was also an effort to address power imbalances that kept women out of key decision-making processes. These women’s narratives often linked environmental degradation with unequal access to resources, limited decision-making power, and restricted access to education and technology. In this sense, their activism was not only a fight for cleaner air or water but a direct challenge to systems that silence and disempower women. The gendered narratives of these leaders often brought to light the lived realities of climate change, highlighting how women experience and address environmental issues in ways that are often overlooked by mainstream environmental policies and discourses. For instance, one participant explained,

“When the floods come, it’s the women who are the first responders caring for the elderly, the children, and ensuring the community’s food security. We are the ones who stay to rebuild, even though our voices aren’t always heard in policy rooms.”

This statement illustrates the deep connection between gendered roles and environmental responsibilities. In many cases, women are not only caretakers of the home but also the primary agents of survival and resilience in their communities during environmental crises. These narratives effectively reframe the climate justice agenda to reflect a broader, more inclusive vision of sustainability. Women activists assert that environmental sustainability cannot be viewed in isolation from gender equality, economic justice, and social equity. As one participant put it,

“You can’t talk about saving the planet while ignoring the inequalities that exist between men and women. Without addressing gender inequality, all the policies in the world won’t stop the destruction.”

This argument posits that gender equality must be a central pillar of climate action if we are to achieve sustainable development. The ability of women leaders to craft these intersectional narratives is particularly significant because it expands the scope of what constitutes climate justice. It challenges the dominant western and male-dominated frameworks of environmental policy, which often prioritize technical solutions like carbon emissions reductions or technological innovations over the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Women’s leadership has thus created a new space within climate justice movements, one that centers on social justice as much as on ecological restoration. Moreover, these gendered narratives also highlight community-based solutions to climate change. Women leaders consistently emphasized local knowledge and traditional practices, such as sustainable farming techniques, community-led reforestation, and water conservation methods, as essential to both climate adaptation and climate mitigation. By integrating their narratives into local contexts, they argue that climate justice should not be top-down or globalized but rather community-driven and tailored to local needs. In essence, women’s narratives challenge the universalizing tendencies of climate justice rhetoric, offering instead an approach that is grounded in specific cultural,

social, and economic contexts. Their ability to redefine environmental struggles through gendered lenses reveals a profound understanding that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without social equity and that true justice in climate movements requires an intersectional perspective that includes the voices of those most affected by both climate change and gender inequality.

Barriers to Women's Leadership in Climate Movements

Despite the growing recognition of women's essential roles in climate justice movements, structural barriers persist that severely limit their ability to exercise full leadership in these spaces. These barriers, deeply rooted in gender inequalities, reflect broader societal patterns of patriarchy, exclusion, and economic disenfranchisement that women face not only in environmental activism but across all sectors of public life. These structural challenges include limited access to decision-making power, lack of financial support, and the ongoing patriarchal resistance that marginalizes women's voices, particularly in communities where men traditionally hold leadership positions. Women often find themselves in the position of fighting not just against environmental degradation but also against long-standing gender biases that undermine their contributions to climate justice. One of the most prominent barriers, as highlighted by several participants, is the systemic undervaluation of women's leadership within environmental movements. Many women leaders described their struggles to be taken seriously within both local and international environmental platforms. For instance, one participant shared,

“When I first began speaking about climate issues, men in my village told me I should stay silent, that it wasn't my place. But we insisted, because silence means more destruction.”

This sentiment reflects a powerful sense of resistance against patriarchal norms that seek to silence women's voices in matters of critical importance like climate change and resource management. In communities with deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, the very act of a woman assuming a leadership position is seen as a challenge to the status quo. Women are often perceived as secondary or subservient, and their leadership is either ignored or undermined. These gendered power dynamics are not only social but are also institutionalized, often affecting the funding and policy support available to female-led environmental initiatives. One participant explained,

“Even when we had a solution, it was hard to get the funding. The big donors often preferred to work with the male leaders because they were seen as more credible or established.”

This underscores the financial barriers that women face, limiting their ability to scale or sustain their climate justice efforts. Moreover, women are frequently excluded from formal political and decision-making spaces where key climate policies are shaped. This marginalization often extends to international platforms such as climate summits, where women, especially from the Global South, have limited representation. The political invisibility of women in these forums means that their perspectives shaped by lived experiences in affected communities are often absent from global climate negotiations. As one participant observed,

“When we speak at the international level, it feels like we’re a token voice. The real decisions are made by men, who don’t have the same lived experiences as us, and yet they’re the ones deciding on policies that affect our lives.”

The gendered division of labor is another significant barrier faced by women leaders. In many societies, women continue to bear the brunt of unpaid domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities, which restricts their time and resources for active participation in political or activist work. One leader from a rural village noted,

“I have to take care of my children, my farm, and my family, and then fight for climate justice. It’s hard to balance everything.”

This highlights the immense time burdens placed on women, which can restrict their mobility and leadership potential in environmental movements. These caregiving duties are often seen as secondary to more “public” forms of activism and leadership, further reinforcing gendered roles that restrict women’s full engagement in high-level decision-making. Beyond the individual level, institutional resistance to women’s leadership is also prevalent within established environmental organizations, governmental bodies, and even climate justice movements themselves. Many of these organizations continue to operate on patriarchal structures that prioritize male leaders, who are often seen as more authoritative or capable in the eyes of donors, governments, and other stakeholders. Women leaders in these spaces frequently face gendered expectations, where their leadership must always be subordinated to male counterparts or structured in ways that conform to male-dominated standards of effectiveness and success. As one participant from an environmental NGO pointed out,

“Even though we lead the majority of grassroots initiatives, it’s always the men who get invited to the big meetings, and the women are left to run the programs.”

Despite these challenges, women in the study demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in navigating these barriers. Many spoke of finding alternative channels of influence by forming women-led networks, cooperatives, and local advocacy groups, which allowed them to circumvent formal structures and create their own spaces of power. One participant, a former community leader in an urban slum, explained:

“We learned to mobilize without waiting for permission from the system. We used what we had, even if it was just a group of women and a few phones, to create change.”

This reflects the adaptive strategies women leaders employ to work around institutional limitations, turning the barriers they face into opportunities for innovative activism and leadership. Women’s leadership in climate justice thus represents not only a challenge to environmental degradation but also to the gendered systems of power that persist within environmental activism and beyond. The barriers discussed here underscore the urgent need for a gender-sensitive approach to climate policies that recognizes women’s leadership and removes the structural obstacles that hinder their full participation. At the same time, the resilience and resourcefulness exhibited by these leaders illustrate that, despite these systemic barriers, women’s contributions to climate justice are powerful, transformative, and essential for building a more equitable and sustainable future.

Implications for Gender-Responsive Climate Leadership

This study, exploring gendered narratives in climate justice and the leadership roles of women in environmental movements, offers important insights into the intersection of gender, climate change activism, and leadership. The findings underscore the transformative power of women's leadership within the climate justice discourse, yet also reveal the persistent structural and institutional barriers that continue to hinder their full participation. The implications of this study are manifold, extending beyond theoretical contributions to practical recommendations for policy and organizational change, particularly within the management of environmental movements and climate justice policies. A central implication of this research is the profound redefinition of leadership within the context of climate justice. Traditionally, leadership in environmental movements has been conceptualized through the lens of technical expertise, hierarchical structures, and formal political positions (Ojha et al., 2022; Oloba & Blankenship, 2024; Fotaki & Foroughi, 2022).

This study reveals that women leaders in climate movements employ a more holistic, grassroots, and inclusive approach to leadership. These women do not merely act as organizers; they reimagine the very concept of leadership, integrating care, community survival, and social justice into their environmental activism. This shift challenges dominant leadership paradigms, offering a new framework that could have wide-reaching implications for how environmental NGOs and governmental organizations design and implement climate justice policies. As Garcia & Tschakert (2022) argues, climate movements must evolve beyond technocratic solutions and engage with the lived experiences of those most affected, particularly marginalized women. By centering women's leadership, this study aligns with calls for more diverse, decentralized, and inclusive leadership models in tackling global challenges like climate change (Stephens, 2024; Stephens, 2022). The second key implication pertains to the intersectionality of climate justice and gender equality.

Women's narratives, as uncovered in this study, foreground the necessity of an intersectional approach to climate change, one that considers the social inequalities that exacerbate the environmental crisis. As Wyatt et al. (2022) originally conceptualized, intersectionality is not merely about recognizing multiple sources of oppression but understanding how these axes of identity gender, race, class interact to create unique experiences of marginalization. This study extends that argument by showing how women leaders in climate justice movements are actively addressing these compounded forms of oppression (Hudson et al., 2024; Ruiz et al., 2021). Women in the Global South, particularly from Indigenous communities, emphasized that their leadership is rooted in ancestral knowledge and cultural survival, both of which are intertwined with gender roles in ways that mainstream environmental narratives often overlook (Msila, 2021; Bhuda & Maditsi, 2022; Santamaría et al., 2022).

These women are not simply environmental advocates; they are cultural stewards who protect their communities from both environmental exploitation and gender-based marginalization. This calls for a deeper integration of gender analysis into climate justice frameworks, particularly at international policy-making tables. This study has implications for the organizational management of climate justice movements. Women leaders, despite their increasing influence in grassroots activism, often face institutional resistance and gendered barriers that hinder their ability to ascend to formal leadership positions. The challenges these women face such as patriarchal exclusion, financial discrimination, and limited access to

political spaces are well-documented in gender studies (Singh, 2024; Schulz, 2022; Baral et al., 2024). These findings challenge the management practices of both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international climate policy organizations, which often maintain gender-blind structures. To truly empower women in environmental activism, organizations must first acknowledge and address these gendered barriers, making deliberate efforts to provide leadership training, access to funding, and political platforms for women activists. This study advocates for a gender-responsive management approach, one that ensures women's leadership is not only recognized but actively promoted through inclusive organizational structures (Götzmann & Bainton, 2021; Asiedu, 2023; Chikwe et al., 2024; Mohanan et al., 2024).

The global climate change discourse remains dominated by male perspectives and technical solutions that often fail to address the social dimensions of climate impacts, particularly those affecting women and marginalized communities (Kwauk & Casey, 2022; Calisto et al., 2024; Böhm et al., 2022). This study's findings, however, suggest that women's leadership in climate justice movements offers an important corrective to this imbalance. Their leadership is deeply contextual, grounded in local knowledge, and focused on community resilience, rather than global policy frameworks that may seem disconnected from the realities of those most impacted by climate change. This critique of top-down climate policies highlights the importance of empowering local, community-based organizations to lead climate solutions. The decentralization of climate action, as advocated by this study, should be at the forefront of climate policy reforms. This implies that international institutions must be more receptive to local knowledge and women's voices, particularly in the creation of climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. The study also has significant practical implications for climate justice advocacy and policy design.

By incorporating the voices of women leaders into climate policy frameworks, international organizations like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and national governments can craft policies that are not only more gender-responsive but also more inclusive and sustainable. This aligns with growing calls for climate justice that is both environmental and socially equitable (Newell et al., 2021; Kaklauskaitė & Streimikiene, 2024; Sultana, 2022). In practice, this would mean pushing for policy initiatives that specifically address the gendered impacts of climate change, such as access to water, food security, and healthcare, which disproportionately affect women. Gender-sensitive policy frameworks should become standard, ensuring that women are not only participants but leaders in the decision-making processes that shape climate action.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the critical role of women's leadership in climate justice movements, demonstrating how gendered narratives reshape the discourse around climate action by emphasizing social equity, resilience, and cultural preservation. Women, especially from marginalized and Indigenous communities, provide vital leadership that challenges traditional hierarchical and technocratic models of environmental activism. However, despite their central role, women face significant barriers such as patriarchal norms, institutional exclusion, and economic marginalization, which undermine their full participation in climate governance. The findings underscore the need for gender-responsive policies and more inclusive leadership structures within climate justice frameworks to enable women to fully contribute to and lead

climate solutions. By recognizing and addressing these structural challenges, the global climate movement can evolve to be more equitable, effective, and sustainable, ensuring that women are not only participants but leaders in shaping a just and resilient future.

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