

Understanding barriers to women's participation in the UN climate negotiations

Perspectives from the least
developed countries

Tracy Kajumba, Leisa Perch, Fernanda Alcobé, Elaine Harty,
Kwasi Pierre and Jacqueline Massiah-Simeon



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Cover photo: A climate negotiator makes an intervention at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan. Photo by IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis

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Abbreviations

COP	Conference of the Parties
CSO	Civil society organisation
GEI	Gender and environment index
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LDCs	Least developed countries
LDC Group	Least Developed Countries Group
NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
SB	Subsidiary body
UN	United Nations
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WEDO	Women's Environment & Development Organisation

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Summary

This research report examines the underlying factors that contribute to the low representation of women at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, focusing on the perspectives of delegates from the 45 least developed countries (LDCs). Since 2008, women have accounted for approximately one in three UNFCCC delegates and, given the rate of change in mitigating this imbalance, gender parity in heads of delegation (about 10% are women) will not be achieved in the foreseeable future (WEDO 2022, WEDO 2024). Noting that LDCs have, on average, lower rates of women participating in UNFCCC negotiations than other regions, this report aims to understand the prevailing factors behind this gender imbalance.

We adjusted a gender needs framework to explore women's participation in the UNFCCC negotiations through four domains of analysis: governance; gender-based education and assets; gender-based rights and participation; and leadership and decision making. With this framework in mind, we conducted a review of the literature on the topic to situate this report within the existing research and contextualise our findings. We then surveyed over 140 respondents and interviewed 28 stakeholders who are familiar with the UNFCCC about their experiences with the negotiations. Conducted in three languages, our survey and interviews collected viewpoints from delegates representing 35 of the 45 LDCs. The themes and findings that emerged from their responses form the basis for the report's discussions, and ultimately, recommended actions to foster more inclusive and diverse representation in UNFCCC negotiations.

Over the course of our research, three LDCs emerged as having recently passed or implemented policies related to gender equality. Mozambique is addressing the lack of negotiator qualification criteria by developing criteria to prioritise women in the UNFCCC delegation selection process and enable them to participate meaningfully in negotiations. Rwanda is addressing the lack of framework for women's involvement in the UNFCCC by institutionalising a comprehensive approach that supports gender equality and women's empowerment, outlining directives around specific actions to be taken across government, the private sector and nongovernmental organisations in the constitution and other laws and policies. And Sierra Leone is addressing the lack of structure in the nomination process by creating a transparent selection process. Bearing in mind that no two countries are the same, the case studies from these three countries highlight nuances or adaptations that other countries can take and contextualise to their own environment.

While the overall policy landscape in many LDCs aims to advance gender equality, at least on paper, policies interact with a noted scarcity of financial resources to facilitate participation in international decision making, as well as political and cultural factors that mean men are more likely to be selected as UNFCCC delegates. Our findings show that the lack of financial resources plays an outsized role in government involvement in the negotiations and the involvement of female delegates in particular. Overarching reflections on potential gender biases in delegate selection, cultural norms, the UNFCCC process and what constitutes leadership and meaningful participation in the negotiations added more nuanced insights to the discussion.

This report recommends a series of actions for national governments, the Least Developed Countries Group (LDC Group), the UNFCCC and funders to foster more inclusive and diverse representation in UNFCCC negotiations. These include: enhancing policy and institutional support for women's participation; instituting targeted funding mechanisms to support women and youth; developing selection criteria for UNFCCC delegations; delivering targeted trainings on gender equality and climate change negotiations; refining UNFCCC session logistics and the visa process; providing childcare support services at UNFCCC negotiations; sensitizing UNFCCC national focal points on gender mandates; and increasing funding for organisations supporting training and capacity building for women and youth negotiators. Our hope is that this report launches further study and experience- and lesson-sharing to increase the participation of women and men from the most vulnerable countries in international climate change decision making.

1

Introduction

Women are often disproportionately impacted by climate change due to their social roles and experiences. Their gender — socially constructed categories describing women and men, often based on biological ‘sex’ — works to shape their expectations, roles and rights. Compared to men, women often have limited access to resources and justice, mobility and voice in shaping decisions and influencing policy (Burns et al. 2017). Their limited voice is evident in the gender imbalance of the United Nations (UN) climate change negotiations, where women have accounted for approximately one in three delegates since 2008 (WEDO 2024). The international negotiations of the UNFCCC play a pivotal role in formulating global strategies and actions to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis.

The purpose of the UNFCCC negotiations is for Parties to regularly review implementation of the convention and other legal instruments they adopt (Tenzing et al. 2023). The Conference of the Parties (COP) meets annually, beginning in Berlin in 1995 (COP1). There are two permanent subsidiary bodies (SBs) to the convention, which meet in parallel, twice a year: once in Bonn at the seat of the UNFCCC Secretariat (this is commonly referred to as an ‘SB session’); and once in conjunction with the annual COP sessions. To participate in the negotiations, all Parties name one head of delegation. Only about 10% of all heads of delegation are women and, given the rate of change since 2009, gender parity in COP heads of delegation will not be achieved in the foreseeable future (WEDO 2022). Each Party also appoints a UNFCCC national focal point, who is not necessarily the head of delegation and is responsible for communicating to the UNFCCC Secretariat the names of people nominated to be in the country delegation.

Some Parties may have only a few people in their delegation. This is particularly so for the 45 LDCs, classified by the UN as the world's poorest nations.¹ The UN introduced the LDC category in 1971 to generalise countries with low levels of socioeconomic development and weak human and institutional capacity.² Based on their gross national income per capita, human assets and economic vulnerability, this grouping qualifies countries for external trade, development and humanitarian support (Andrei et al. 2016). The UNFCCC Secretariat administers the Trust Fund for Participation in the UNFCCC Process,³ which typically funds three delegates from each LDC Party for COPs, and one or two delegates for SB sessions (Tenzing et al. 2023). There is no maximum or minimum number of people in a delegation. Delegates are usually government officials but may also include nongovernment representatives who provide technical support. Whether these delegates are allowed to negotiate on behalf of the Party depends on the delegation.

1 The LDCs include: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Timor Leste, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Yemen and Zambia. www.un.org/ohrrls/content/profiles-ldcs

2 For information on current UN LDC identification criteria and indicators, see <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/ldc-criteria.html>

3 This fund supports representatives of developing countries and economies in transition, particularly LDCs and Small Island Developing States, to attend UNFCCC sessions. Offers for funding participation are sent to eligible Parties through their national focal points, who then nominate representatives and enter their information, including gendered prefixes, in the online registration system. The ability to fund participants through the fund is contingent on voluntary contributions. See <https://unfccc.int/documents/39629>

In 2001, COP7 acknowledged the disparity in women's representation in international climate decision-making bodies and decided to advocate for improving women's participation at all levels (UNFCCC 2001). Eleven years later, a COP18 decision called on Parties to promote gender balance and improve women's participation in UNFCCC negotiations, aiming for a "gradual but significant increase" (UNFCCC 2012). This set the stage for establishing a gender action plan at COP23 in 2017, which contains five priority areas for gender inclusion in climate policy and highlights the lack of progress delegations had made towards achieving gender balance (UNFCCC 2017). At COP25 in 2019, Parties yet again acknowledged the importance of women's full, meaningful and equal participation and leadership within all levels of the UNFCCC. They also agreed to encourage Parties to appoint and provide support for a national gender and climate change focal point for climate negotiations, implementation and monitoring (UNFCCC 2019b).

Noting that LDCs have, on average, lower rates of women participating in UNFCCC negotiations than other regions, this report aims to understand the prevailing factors behind this gender imbalance (Craft and McCraine 2019). The study draws from literature on women's participation in governance and decision making, particularly factors that influence participation. We seek to investigate the following research questions: What are the underlying factors that contribute to the low representation of women in UNFCCC negotiations? Which practices show promise in promoting gender balance and meaningful representation? We explore these questions through a survey and interviews with stakeholders, predominately from LDCs, and through case studies from Rwanda, Mozambique and Sierra Leone.

We were guided in this process by an advisory group of LDC negotiators, civil society practitioners and gender experts to ensure we took on board the views of our key stakeholders and that these added depth to the proposed recommendations. This report adds to the literature by providing insights on the LDC delegation selection experience and exploring why gender imbalance persists in the UNFCCC. We conclude with recommended actions for fostering more inclusive and diverse representation in UNFCCC negotiations, which countries or agencies can contextualise or adapt to their own unique circumstances. We hope this report launches further study and sharing of experiences and lessons to increase the meaningful participation of women and men from the most vulnerable countries in international climate change decision making.

2

Understanding barriers to women's participation

We begin with an exploration of the literature, seeking to understand the barriers women face when participating in governance and decision making. In this section, we also discuss gender equity within the LDC Group in the UN climate change negotiations, explore women's participation in decision making and categorize the factors that influence women's participation in climate decision making. We define these as: cultural and gender norms; institutional and governance factors; unequal access to knowledge, skills and capabilities; and economic and financial factors. The literature review forms the basis of our research, the methodology of which we describe in Section 3.

The climate crisis is not gender neutral; experiences and responses are affected by existing formal and informal systems, including patriarchy, racism, classism and extractive capitalism. Although gender is a significant factor that determines an individual's experience, other factors — such as race, class, geographical location, marital status, sexuality, age and ability — also significantly influence the way an individual experiences a changing climate; as such, an intersectional lens is crucial (Maguire et al. 2022; Sultana 2021). It is important to recognise that climate change affects different people differently, due to the intersection of discrimination based on social factors, income, gender, ethnicity, age, class and (dis)ability, among other factors (Devonald et al. 2023).

Unequal experiences of the impacts of climate change make it difficult to achieve gender equality, especially for those who are already disadvantaged, as the impacts have various social, financial and economic dimensions (IPCC 2022; Kaijser and Kronsell 2013). The complex interaction of social factors puts women and marginalized groups at greater risk of experiencing the adverse effects of climate change over a prolonged period (UN 2022).

Both scholars and political actors recognise the existence of climate-related injustices between different countries and areas, and this is a focus in international climate negotiations. While geographical and economic factors are not exhaustive for explaining climate injustice, those most exposed and vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change are poor and marginalised people living in low-income countries; and they tend to be underrepresented at all levels of climate decision making (IEA 2011).

The UNFCCC recognises the need for women and men to be equally represented in all aspects of the convention process and for climate action to respond to the differentiated needs, experiences, priorities and capacities of women and men (UNFCCC 2019a). The Paris Agreement also requires Parties, when taking action to address climate change, to respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations, the right to development, gender equality, women's empowerment and intergenerational equity (UNFCCC 2015). But despite these provisions, gender gaps persist within countries, between countries and in the UNFCCC.

2.1 Gender equity within the LDC Group

Following an invitation to Parties to communicate their views on gender-responsive climate policy with a focus on mitigation action and technology development and transfer, the LDC Group made a submission to the UNFCCC on gender under Decision 18/CP.20. In it, the group recognises that gender equality is crucial in effectively responding to climate change and states its commitment to advancing gender equality in the climate change context and more broadly.⁴ Most LDCs have ratified key international instruments — such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action — as well as regional protocols and have registered some successes towards achieving gender equality.

Although many studies recognise that women are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, few identify the links between gendered vulnerabilities and women's economic, political and social status. Challenges remain around gender integration and coherence in climate policies and strategies, multisectoral collaboration in project and programme implementation, and coordination with the Sustainable Development Goals and national development plans and priorities (UN Women 2018).

LDC Group submissions on the Lima Work Programme on Gender and gender-responsive climate policy to the UNFCCC in 2015, 2016 and 2024⁵ highlight the group's commitment to gender equality and reference national gender policies, institutions and constitutional instruments that can address gender disparities and discrimination and enhance equal political participation and opportunities for disadvantaged groups. But they also note challenges, including values that are oppressive to women and other marginalised groups, inadequate mainstreaming of gender equality into climate change policies and actions, insufficient domestic budget allocated for implementing gender-related plans and activities, a lack of UNFCCC financial and technical support for female LDC Group negotiators to participate actively in the climate change meetings, and a lack of comprehensive programmes designed to enhance women's participation in decision making and governance.

Despite significant progress at national level, the LDCs are disadvantaged by other complexities in the UNFCCC processes and struggle to remain on an equal footing with their wealthier counterparts. For example, their geographical distance from Bonn, Germany (where the intersessional meetings are held) and the UNFCCC COPs makes travel extremely expensive for most governments, and with negotiations conducted primarily in English, translating and interpreting text is a major challenge for non-English speaking countries (Andrei et al. 2016).

There has been progress, and a woman occupied the LDC Group chair for the first time in 2022 and 2023. But female representation from LDCs is still markedly limited, and when UNFCCC funding for LDC delegates is particularly scarce, women become noticeably absent. Although some governments' decisions to include more women in their delegations have improved women's participation to an extent, once nominated, few women reach the higher positions (Tenzing 2017; Abeyasinghe 2016).

2.2 Women's participation in climate decision making

Participation is a broad concept that can mean different things to different people. It is also an ideologically contested concept that produces a range of competing meanings and applications (Claridge 2004). As a result, there are multiple views on what participation means, who should be involved, and what it should achieve (Agarwal 2001).

Definitions focus variously on involving all stakeholders at all stages of development, outcomes, empowerment and the important role of disadvantaged groups, particularly women and the poor. For some, true participation is where power and control are shared, and stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policymaking, resource allocations and access to public goods and services (Claridge 2004; Oxfam GB 2008).

Decision-making bodies in land, climate change and conservation sectors are consistently dominated by men, and rarely consider women's needs and interests (Sutz 2019; Sutz et al. 2021). Despite increasing recognition of this lack of participation — including within planning and institutional systems — there is limited evidence of what really works to ensure women can fully and effectively participate in political, public and economic life. Key concerns

⁴ <https://genderclimatetracker.org/resource/23337/?s>

⁵ Submitted by Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Malawi.

include: understanding what constitutes legitimate and effective public participation; the relationships of diversity with representation and inclusion; the nature and appropriate role of different kinds of knowledge and expertise in participation; and the challenge of designing participatory processes that are well adapted to the context of those likely to be excluded (Quick and Bryson 2016).

Legitimacy of participation is also key. Deliberative democracy is about the quality of participation in terms of clarity, logical arguments and outcomes. Decisions need to be translated into policy outcomes that are equitable, efficient and technically implementable (Ostrom 1990) and address stakeholder needs and interests.

Achieving a critical mass is important for influencing decision making. For example, in community forestry institutions in Nepal and India, the most important factor in women's voices being heard is their ability to create a critical mass at meetings. To have a positive impact on gender outcomes, this translates into at least 25–50% participation of women, with 50%+ participation increasing their likelihood of taking on a leadership role (Agarwal 2015; Sutz et al. 2021).

Another theoretical lens for understanding legitimacy relates to the quality of the process. Procedural justice refers to whether, or the extent to which, the process embodies democratic values such as fairness, transparency, or attentiveness to stakeholders' concerns. When diverse voices are included and power is managed so that potentially marginalized groups do influence outcomes, there are strong payoffs for the legitimacy of the process, the quality of decisions and effective decision implementation (Quick and Bryson 2016; Oxfam GB 2008; Claridge 2004).

Women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (UN Women 2018). But from local to global levels, women's political participation and leadership are restricted, with barriers to their representation both as voters and in leading positions in elected office, the civil service, the private sector, academia and the UNFCCC. This occurs despite their proven abilities as leaders and agents of change, and their right to participate equally in democratic governance.

Box 1. Women's participation in numbers

- Women represent 23.3% of cabinet members heading ministries, leading a policy area, as of 1 January 2024; and there are only 15 countries in which women hold 50% or more cabinet minister positions leading policy areas (UN Women 2024b).
- The five most-held portfolios by women ministers are family/children/youth/elderly/disabled; social affairs; environment/natural resources/energy; employment/labour/vocational training; and women's affairs/gender equality.
- Women make up 36% of legislators in Latin America and the Caribbean, compared to 33% in Europe and North America, 27% in sub-Saharan Africa, 23% in East and Southeast Asia, 20% in Oceania, and just 18% in Central, Southern and Western Asia and North Africa (IPU 2024).

Women's participation is hampered by restrictive laws, cultural practices and institutional barriers, and limited access to quality education, training, healthcare, financial resources, technology, and the forums where political decisions are made (UN Women 2024a; Ilesanmi 2018; Collingwood 2021).

2.3 Factors influencing women's participation

Women's full and effective participation is a matter of human rights, inclusive growth and sustainable development (OECD 2018). The active participation of women, on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision making and political involvement is essential to achieve equality, sustainable development, peace and democracy, and include their perspectives and experiences in decision making (Mlambo et al. 2019).

2.3.1 Cultural and gender norms

Women's ability to engage is often shaped by norms that drive wider social structures, especially the entrenched patriarchal system in which family control and decision-making powers in both the public and private spheres are

in male hands. Traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding women's roles and status in society prevail, and traditional roles and the division of labour remain gendered (George 2019).

Women's representation in local government varies according to local social norms and power dynamics (UN Women 2024a). Unequal power relations impact women's ability to participate fully in public life and attain leadership positions. There are many ways that this power inequality is maintained, including the use (or threat) of violence against women, restrictions on women's activities or movement sanctioned by culture or religion, gender stereotyping that presents women's unequal place in society as 'natural' and 'normal', and patronage systems and networks that are dominated by men and male interests (Oxfam GB 2008).

At international level, the UNFCCC Secretariat has revised its code of conduct, providing guidelines for behaviour at all negotiation events, mandating respect for human rights, prohibiting any form of harassment (including sexual harassment) and emphasizing ethical conduct. The UNFCCC is committed to enabling events where everyone can participate in an inclusive, respectful, healthy and safe environment and be treated with fairness and dignity: all participants are expected to abide by these standards and non-compliance can lead to various penalties, including removal from the event (UNFCCC 2023). Parties have also written to the UN calling for action to "ensure a harassment-free environment" at the talks (Mooney and Hodgson 2023). These behaviours, which can deter women from participating, are prevalent across different levels of society.

But at COP28, female delegates reported experiencing bullying, intimidation, inappropriate language and behaviour, abuse, sexual harassment or undermining of women's credibility by male negotiators. Allegations included women being belittled, talked over and shouted at by male counterparts in meetings, which was noted as a culture problem, with toxic alpha male behaviour.

Disparities in the treatment of women are evident, even in technical fields. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2018 Task Group on Gender report, presented at a plenary session in May 2019, shows persistent perceived gender biases and barriers, highlighting the importance of other dimensions of diversity that intersect with gender including ethnicity, race, language, nationality, religion, disability and age (Liverman et al. 2022). Its key findings include:

- Women's representation as authors of the IPCC assessment reports has grown from just 8% in the first report in 1990, to one-third in the Sixth Assessment Report in 2022
- Women now constitute about 30% of researchers worldwide but have lower representation at senior levels
- Women are 15% less likely than men to agree that everyone has equal opportunities to be nominated, speak, shape content or lead chapters
- Women are, on average, 15% more likely than men to have witnessed discrimination against others
- 40% of women consider their lack of confidence in challenging others a barrier to inclusion, compared with 26% of men
- Most nominations to the IPCC are made through government agencies and other national focal points, which can reflect scientific hierarchies and biases in countries and organisations that favour men, and
- More women than men report seeing someone else take credit for a woman's idea (38% versus 24%) or a woman being ignored (52% versus 30%) or patronised (41% versus 27%).

Gendered sociocultural norms can be a strong constraining factor to participation. While culture is not homogenous, in many sociocultural contexts, the gendered, hierarchical nature of community norms and institutions influence the way women and girls participate in and benefit from collective action and decision making (Sutz et al. 2021).

2.3.2 Institutional and governance factors

Women's inclusion in governance systems and structures has a strong normative value but has also been accompanied by the expectation that it should improve governance outputs (Mechkova et al. 2022). This assumes that men and women have different policy preferences, and gendered preferences can be a result of socialisation, shaped by different lived experiences rather than inherent biological differences (Beckwith 2014). This emphasises the need for an intersectional analysis of disadvantages shaped by individual, country and other experiences. Women's empowerment is also associated with improved policy representation of women's interests (CARE 2023).

Many countries have gender-relevant policies that guide national development and many have integrated gender into their nationally determined contributions and national action plans. Countries are also encouraged to address gender issues as part of the Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender and its Gender Action Plan. Adopting gender quotas more generally has significantly changed country trends in women's representation at national and local levels, in developing and developed regions (UN Women 2021b). Gender equality policies and policies of decentralisation have been of particular significance in increasing women's representation at local level (Oxfam GB 2008). These experiences could also provide lessons and best practices for representation at global conferences, including the UNFCCC negotiations. But these efforts have yet to achieve gender parity.

When it comes to shaping outcomes, women's increased representation in governance bodies and the adoption of quota systems — which prescribe that a minimum percentage of decision-making body members should be women — guarantees neither their full and effective participation nor that women's voices have proportionate influence (International Alert 2012; Sutz et al. 2021). Quotas are not always respected; but even when they are, women do not always attend meetings or fully and effectively participate in decision making. It is worth noting, however, that structures with a high proportion of women show significantly greater improvements in participation than groups with a low proportion of women (Agarwal 2001).

Starting as a 'gender-blind' multilateral agreement in 1994, the UNFCCC has made progress towards achieving gender balance. COP decisions have recommended promoting gender parity and encouraging the participation and representation of women in climate change decision making at subnational, national, and international levels (Aguilar Revelo 2021).

The two-year Lima Work Programme on Gender, adopted at COP20 in 2014, aimed to promote gender balance and gender-responsive climate policies (UNFCCC 2014).

At COP23 the first three year Gender Action Plan was established to advance knowledge and understanding of gender-responsive climate action, and promote its comprehensive implementation in the UNFCCC and relevant entities (UNFCCC 2017).

In 2019 at COP 25 in Madrid countries adopted a five-year Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender, and Gender Action Plan to further advance gender mandates across all areas of the UNFCCC, including women's full, equal and meaningful participation in the UNFCCC process (UNFCCC, 2019). The decision text also encourages Parties to appoint and support a national gender and climate change focal point for climate negotiations, implementation and monitoring (UNFCCC 2019b).

Table 1. Gender composition of Party delegations to the most recent UNFCCC sessions

Sessions		Total number of delegates	Number of women	Number of men	Women's representation (%)	Change in number of women since 2023 (PP)
COP28	Party delegates	43,129	15,675	29,958	36	–1
CMP 18 CMA 5	Heads and deputy heads of delegation	869	239	599	27.5	–1.5
SB 60	Party delegates	2,424	1,236	1,180	51	1
	Heads and deputy heads of delegation	319	123	194	38.5	1.5

Note: A total of six Party delegates or heads or deputy heads of delegation indicated Mx. or Ind. as their prefix and 531 Party delegates or heads or deputy heads of delegation did not provide prefixes, thus their gender could not be inferred. These individuals are included in the number of total delegates but not in the numbers of women or men.

Source: UNFCCC (2024b)

In 2009, only 10% of heads of COP delegations were women, rising slightly to 13% in 2021. Women's participation tends to be highest (45–50%) in delegations from Latin America, Eastern Europe and Western Europe, and lowest (30–35%) in African and Asian delegations (WEDO 2022). In 2024, women's participation ranged from 18% on the technology executive committee to 71% in the facilitative working group, and 40% or more in seven constituted bodies.⁶ On average, they occupied 39% of positions in these bodies, up from 38% in 2023, but numbers fluctuate across different bodies and years (UNFCCC 2024). Between 2013 and 2024, women's representation increased in 10 constituted bodies, most significantly in the Facilitative Working Group of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (from 14% to 71%) and the Adaptation Committee (from 20% to 63%). But in the Consultative Group of Experts, mandated to help developing countries fulfil their reporting requirements, it fell from 52% to 33% (UNFCCC 2024).

Looking at how gender and age intersect in relation to Party delegates and delegation heads and deputy heads, it is clear that women's representation drops steeply as age increases. For example, female Party delegates accounted for the majority of delegates in the under-26 age group at the most recent UNFCCC sessions and the 26–35 age group at SB60, while in the 56–65 and over-66 age groups, only 24–33% of delegates were women, falling to 9–34% for delegation heads and deputy heads (UNFCCC 2024).

2.3.3 Unequal access to knowledge, skills and capabilities

People of all genders — but particularly women and girls — require knowledge, skills and capabilities to gain the power to change their own lives and the world around them, including their own consciousness, self-esteem and aspirations in the nonformal sphere (CARE 2023). Women's voices rely on their individual and collective capabilities to strengthen their own agency, which are shaped by their life experiences and embedded in the wider sociocultural context. Formal education and access to legal and technical knowledge, networks and solidarity can enhance individual capabilities (Sutz et al. 2021).

Ensuring access to quality education for women and girls is a key pathway for gender parity in climate leadership. Girls' education can be a force for gender equality in families and communities and is closely associated with a country's female political representation (Jordan 2019). Climate education for girls — including technical environmental training — can increase their resilience and build their capacity to critically engage with climate information and lead climate solutions. In developed and developing countries alike, girls' participation in science, technology, engineering and maths education on an equal platform with boys can enable them to access traditionally male-dominated jobs and spaces (Jeffs 2022; Patel et al. 2023).

In the climate sciences, as in other disciplines, women face compounding barriers — such as unequal access to training and funding, fewer promotions and citations, lower wages and scarce role models — as well as more harassment and greater family responsibilities than men. Women in the earth sciences are less likely than men to be nominated for awards or offered senior leadership positions (Liverman et al. 2022). They are also disproportionately disadvantaged by metrics used to evaluate research. For example, only two women made it into the top 50 of a list of the world's 1,000 leading climate scientists (Tamman 2021), but the report was based on scientometrics,⁷ and only 12% of the 1,000 scientists on the list were women. Researchers and practitioners from the global South working in climate change also criticised the report metrics, noting that, while over three-quarters of the global population lives in Asia and Africa, more than three-quarters of the scientists on the list are located in Europe and North America, and only five are in Africa (Okem et al. 2021). This shows that LDC Group members do not only face gender equity challenges; as developing countries, they face other intersectional challenges.

There are good examples of capacity-building initiatives that support delegates, led by observer organisations and supported by Parties including the Women Delegates Fund⁸ and IIED's capacity-building programme, which provides training for LDC delegates, particularly women, to improve their negotiation skills and support new negotiators to attend and actively engage in the UNFCCC process.

⁶ These are specialised bodies with limited membership established by the governing bodies of the UNFCCC to support Parties and the intergovernmental process.

⁷ Scientometrics uses number of papers published as a metric for ranking. Critics note that this focus on quantity has led to poor quality research and is a disincentive for those who focus on quality, do not have budgets for publishing, and so on.

⁸ <https://wedo.org/what-we-do/our-programs/women-delegates-fund/>

But data collected from nine IIED regional training workshops in 2016–2018 noted that the average ratio of workshop participants was 43% women to 57% men. Half the participants (both genders equally) made it to a negotiation session as a national representative during that timeframe, but consistency in participation was negatively impacted by a lack of continuity in the selection of trained delegates at country level. Consistency was lower for female delegates, at 24%, compared to 30% for men. Notably, the three participants who attended all seven COP negotiation sessions from 2016–18 were men (Craft and McCraine 2019).

Low literacy levels also make access to information difficult, commonly undermining the confidence and skills needed to enter public life, whether at village, community, local, or national level. One example cited by an Oxfam study in West Africa was that once elected, many women councillors felt overwhelmed by and ill-equipped for the duties that they are expected to undertake, often due to poor literacy skills, particularly when it comes to working in English (Oxfam GB 2008). This — and the way political and economic systems are organised — creates institutional gender bias against women seeking equal participation and competing for leadership positions. Other major challenges for all women include scepticism and mistrust of their ability to lead, and stereotypes and prejudices about their role in society and their lack of suitability for leadership roles and decision making (Oxfam GB 2008; Liverman et al. 2022). Providing targeted training to women who want to assume positions of leadership or engage in UNFCCC negotiations can help more women overcome such barriers, enabling them to influence decision making (Aguilar Revelo 2021).

2.3.4 Economic and financial factors

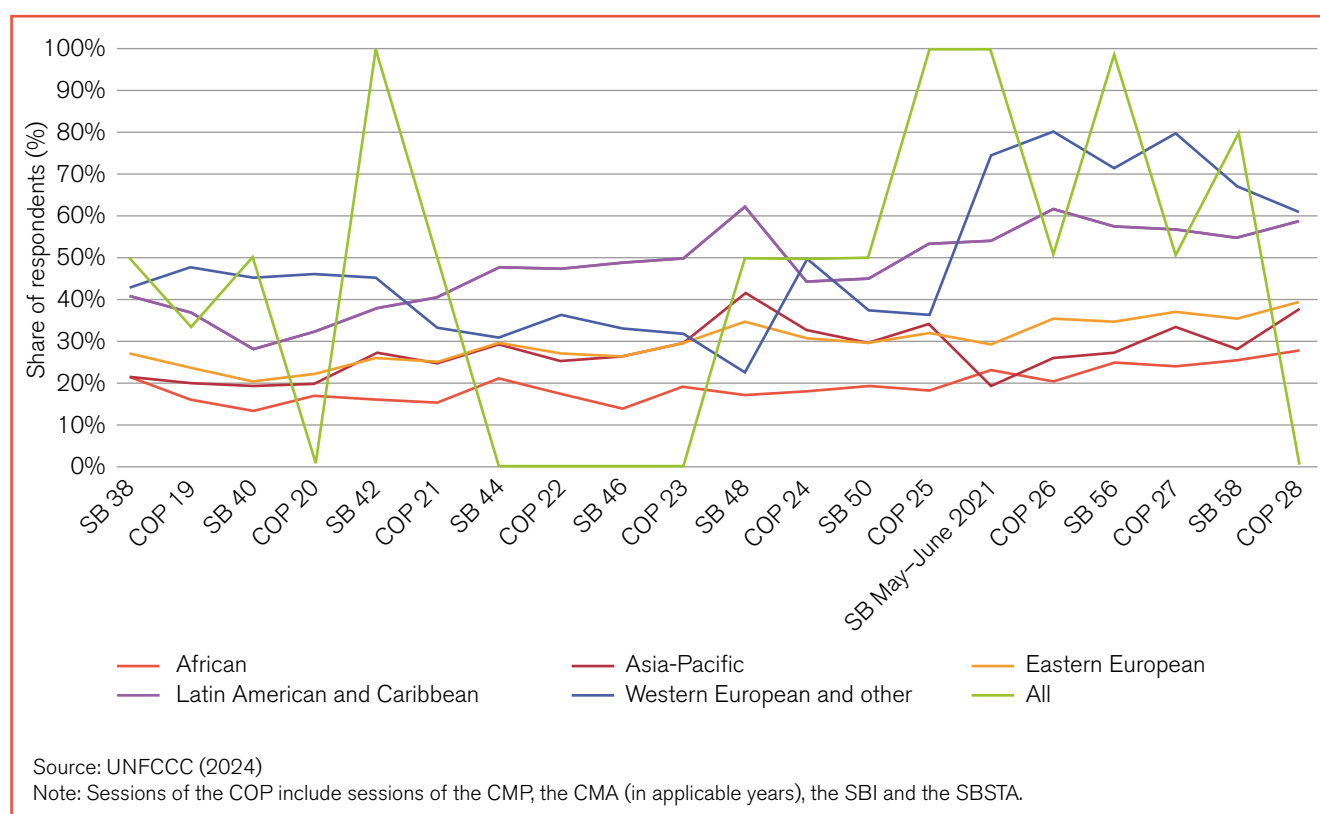
Women's socioeconomic status plays a significant role in enhancing their participation and representation in political decision-making bodies. Access to power tends to emerge from familial, communal and economic linkages, which may help explain patterns of participation (Mlambo et al. 2019). A lack of financial resources restricts poor women's opportunities and confidence to risk competing for, and maintaining, leadership.

The Women Delegates Program, administered by the Women's Environment & Development Organisation (WEDO) and funded by several development partners, sponsors Party delegates, particularly from LDCs and Small Island Developing States, to participate in UNFCCC-convened meetings and negotiations. Although this type of travel assistance alone cannot address structural gender inequality in decision making at regional and national levels, it is crucial to support women's full and effective participation in international forums, enabling women to be in the room and raise gender issues to decision makers, which increases awareness of the need to address gender equity and results in more inclusive climate policy decisions.

The Trust Fund for Participation supports underrepresented groups, including women, to attend UNFCCC sessions.⁹ And, although the gender composition of Party delegates who received support from the fund between 2013 and 2023 reveals a moderate positive trend overall and across all regions, the share of female delegates receiving trust fund support remains at 30% over the 10 years. Current levels and distribution of funding contribute to marginal improvements but remain too low to have a significant positive impact on improving gender balance and advancing women's participation in the UNFCCC process (UNFCCC 2024). There is also great disparity on access to funding by region, with Africa — where most LDCs are located — at the bottom of the ladder (see Figure 1).

⁹ It is important to note, however, that although the fund facilitates their participation, such support does not eliminate structural barriers to women's participation.

Figure 1. Share of female Party delegates who received funding through the trust fund for in-person participation in UNFCCC sessions from 2013–2023, by regional group



Lack of funding is an important obstacle to women's leadership, and can be compounded by other factors, such as unequal status in society and failing to gain the full support of institutional leaders, who are mostly men. In Sierra Leone, women who stood in the 2004 local elections said that the small grants made an enormous difference, enabling them to travel and cover other expenses during their campaigning (Oxfam GB 2008).

Overall, gender equality and women's empowerment are not just about individual change: they are also about societal change, and require long-term efforts to address inequity, support action in communities and beyond, link and facilitate strong partnerships and support for social actors, and retain a high level of agility (CARE 2023). Addressing gender inequality is not just a technical issue, it requires people to challenge and change unequal power relations, and continue to build consciousness of inequalities and skills for collective action across scales.

Engaging men as agents of change alongside women, and ensuring they are receptive to the idea of women occupying positions of leadership and power, is crucial in challenging the inequality and discrimination that women face. Providing training for male leaders and identifying male champions in positions of authority who can support women's leadership and participation are two tested approaches (Oxfam GB 2008; CARE 2023). But it is not clear how male UNFCCC national focal points and other leaders of constituted bodies are engaged to support gender equity outcomes in the UNFCCC processes.

3

Purpose, framing and methodology

This study draws on the literature on women's participation in governance and decision making, assessing the barriers to participation and the factors that influence participation, which we categorised into four groups: cultural and gender norms; institutional and governance factors; unequal access to knowledge, skills and capabilities; and economic and financial factors. In this section, we outline the purpose of this report and describe our theoretical framework and methods for further exploring our two research questions: What are the underlying factors that contribute to the low representation of women in UNFCCC negotiations? And which practices show promise in promoting gender balance and meaningful representation?

3.1 Purpose of this study

This study investigated the causes of low representation of women in the UNFCCC processes, mainly focusing on the causes of gender imbalance in climate negotiations, particularly within the LDC context. Our main research objectives were to:

- Understand the underlying factors that contribute to the low representation of women in UNFCCC negotiations
- Identify effective practices that have shown promise in addressing gender imbalance and promoting meaningful representation
- Examine the challenges and opportunities associated with increasing women's participation in UNFCCC processes and constituted bodies
- Identify entry points that can inform national- and international-level policies, practices, and plans to advance gender equality within climate change governance, and
- Provide evidence and recommendations that can support advocacy for better policy, practice and programming change, thereby enhancing greater gender equality in climate negotiations and decision making.

3.2 Framework and domains of analysis

To contextualize the factors contributing to the under-representation of women in the UNFCCC negotiations, we reviewed the literature for frameworks that would help structure our research. Once defined and adapted, we used four domains of analysis under a gender needs framework explained in this section, and surveyed and interviewed stakeholders familiar with the UNFCCC about their experiences with the negotiations, focusing on LDC delegates.

In 2013, the International Union for Conservation of Nature piloted a gender and environment index (GEI) to monitor progress toward gender equality and women's empowerment in the environmental arena, to help governments and policymakers assess their commitments and build on the proven correlation between women's rights and national efforts towards sustainability (IUCN 2013). The pilot GEI brought together environment and gender variables in a composite index comprising 27 dimensions in six categories: ecosystems; gender-based education and assets; governance; country-reported activities; livelihoods; and gender-based rights and participation (Granat and Owren 2015). In the decade since, the GEI has evolved to further uncover the drivers of inequality and unsustainability and pursue linkages with other key platforms for information and monitoring.

This report uses an evolution of the GEI framework that has adjusted the gender needs framework to explore women's participation in the UNFCCC negotiations (see Figure 2). We focused on four categories of analysis (see Figure 3), three of which were in the GEI's original design.

Figure 2. Gender needs framework adapted for climate resilience

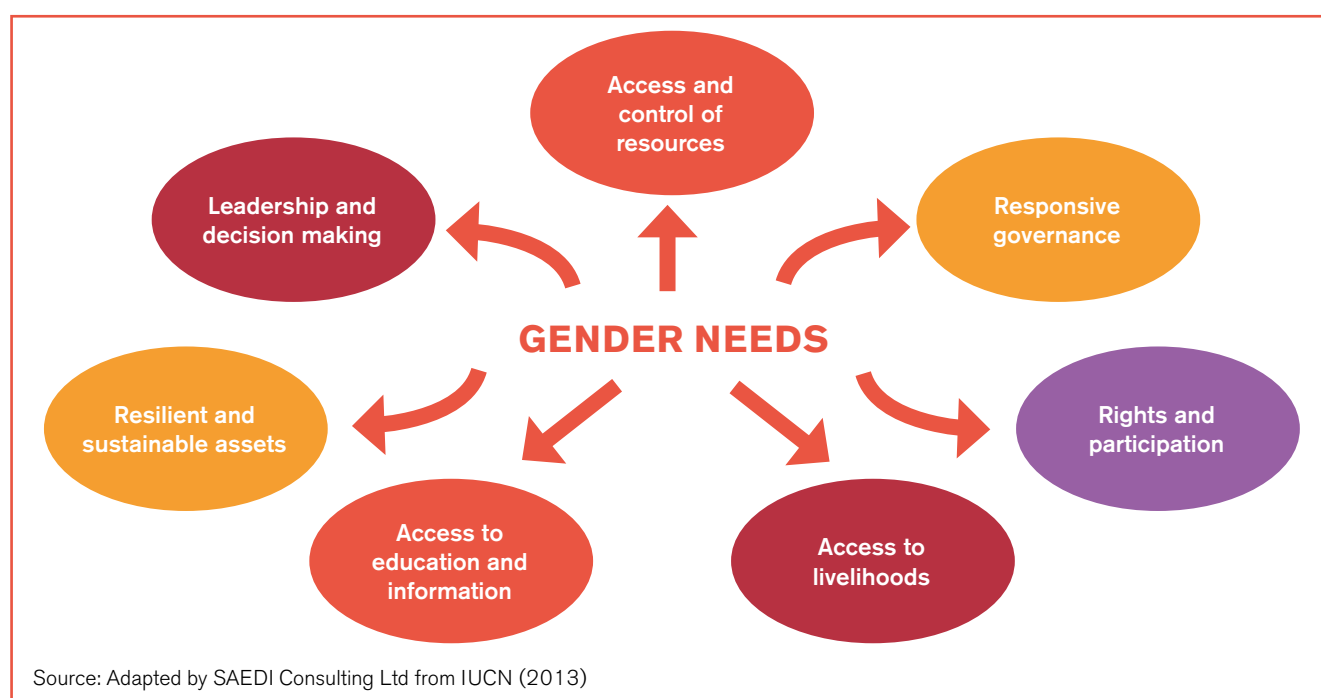
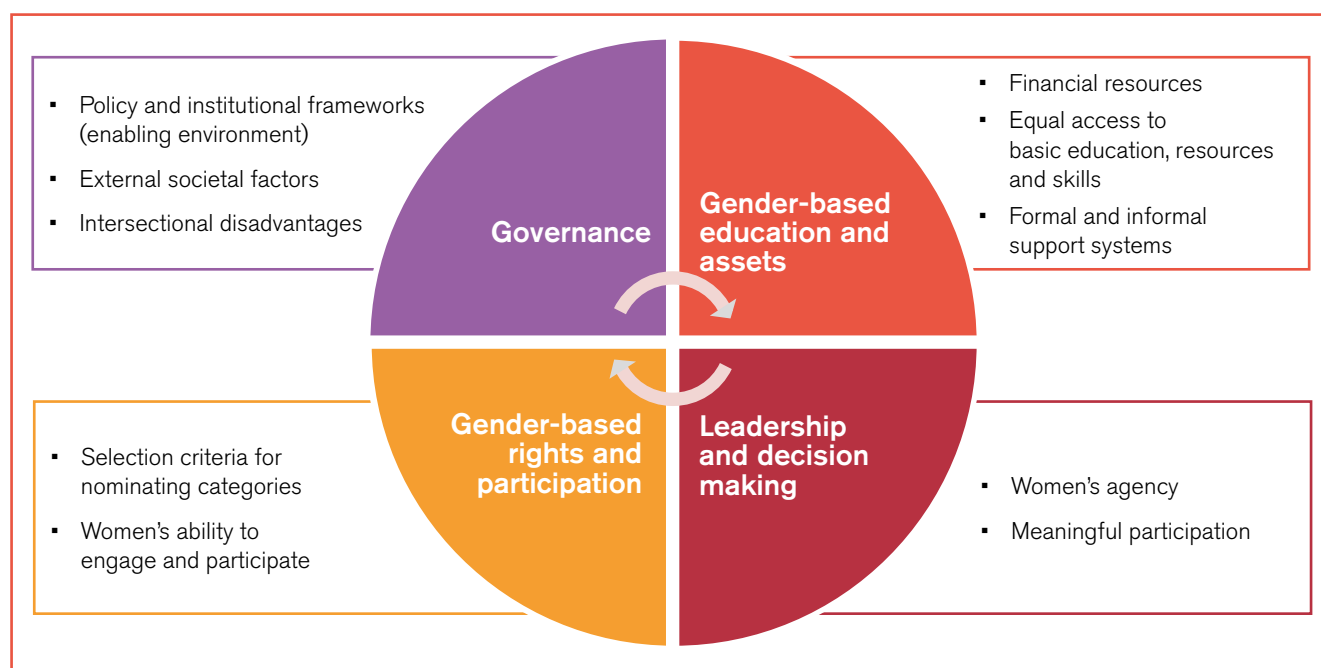


Figure 3. Four domains of analysis and associated themes



In more detail, our four domains of analysis are:

- 1. Governance:** This domain assesses the effectiveness of a country's fundamental institutional capacities and its citizens' ability to participate freely in the political process (IUCN 2013). In the context of this study, we consider systems and structures that impact participation in UNFCCC decision making. In the interviews, we assess the policies that support national approaches to participation in governance, especially those that advance gender equality. We also explore other external factors that relate to informal governance, such as culture, on the delegate nomination process.
- 2. Gender-based education and assets:** This domain focuses on equal access to basic education and resources, which gives women the tools, skills and preparation they need to effectively engage in environmental decision making and resource use (IUCN 2013). Here, we consider the access to financial and other resources that delegates need to engage in UNFCCC sessions. Through survey and interview questions, we explore whether enough mechanisms are in place to support LDC delegates. While funding is a tangible measure of this support, we also ask about formal and informal systems of support, and whether access to these resources differs for women and men.
- 3. Gender-based rights and participation:** This domain examines women's ability to engage in leadership (IUCN 2013). In our context, this means UNFCCC decision-making roles. Exploring how countries select their delegations, we ask about the process and criteria for nominating delegates, and whether these differ for women and men. Survey and interview respondents reflect on why women's participation in the UNFCCC negotiations is lower than men's, particularly in LDCs.
- 4. Leadership and decision making:** This domain focuses on women's agency and impact on the negotiations once at the decision-making table (IUCN 2013). Being nominated is a key step, but we also explore how women exercise power at the highest levels of the UNFCCC — for example, when they are appointed to governing bodies. Interview participants reflect on what constitutes meaningful and effective participation within the negotiation process and whether this is different for women and men. Our survey responses add perspectives on why women are not adequately represented at the highest levels of the UNFCCC and whether women are overlooked in favour of men.

Defining these domains allowed us to further refine our overarching research questions and sub-questions, which we used to ask those familiar with the UNFCCC — particularly delegates from LDCs — about their experiences pertaining to the negotiations.

3.3 Research methodology

To ensure the research was guided by LDC voices and benefitted from a diversity of perspectives at both local and international levels, we established the LDC Advisory Group, comprising negotiators, gender and climate change focal points, nongovernmental actors and UNFCCC gender experts. The group met periodically to review findings, providing useful feedback and support to ensure our research was targeted and grounded in current realities.

3.3.1 Survey

Launched online via SurveyMonkey, our survey was available in English, French and Portuguese. We invited former and current climate negotiators, UNFCCC national focal points, national gender and climate change focal points, representatives of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the climate space, members of the UNFCCC Secretariat and other stakeholders to take part. There were 25 questions, eight of which appeared based on skip logic used in the previous questions. The survey employed a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Relevant identity information was captured in questions 1–8 while questions 9–25 explored women's participation in the UNFCCC negotiations. The survey amassed 172 responses, which were reduced to 143, as 29 respondents did not make it past the first question. This dropout rate may have been due to internet connectivity issues. For future explorations of LDC perspectives, we would like to provide hard copy options to mitigate technical issues and determine if this would reduce the dropout rate.

Of the 143 respondents, 105 people completed the survey in English, 33 in French, and 5 in Portuguese. The vast majority of respondents (123 or 86%) were female, and only 19 (13%) were men. One identified as non-binary. It is noteworthy that most of the survey respondents were women who identified as negotiators. In a study of low female participation in the UNFCCC, this group of respondents gives us greater insight into what women experience as barriers to their involvement. It offers less insight into what men perceive as limiting factors to women's participation. The responses from the 19 male negotiators allowed us to analyse how perspectives differ between women and men.

Over half (80 or 56%) of all respondents were from Africa, 26 (18.2%) were from Asia, and three-quarters (106 or 74%) indicated that they were from an LDC (see Figures 4 and 5). The breakdown of respondents from LDCs is detailed in Figure 6.

Figure 4. Survey responses to the question: "Which region are you from?"

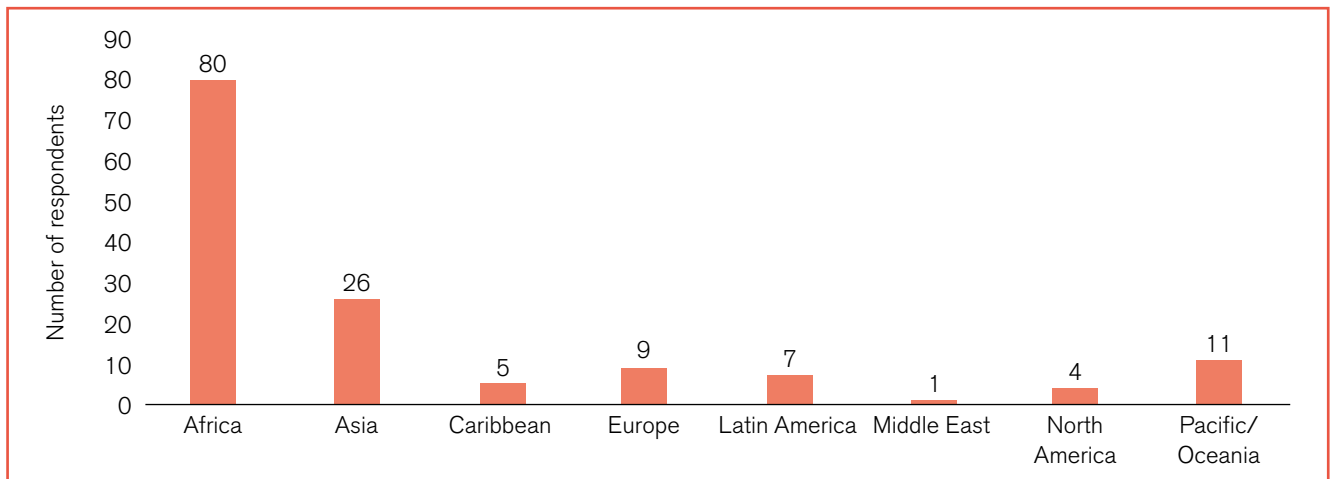


Figure 5. Survey responses to the question: "Are you from a Least Developed Country?"

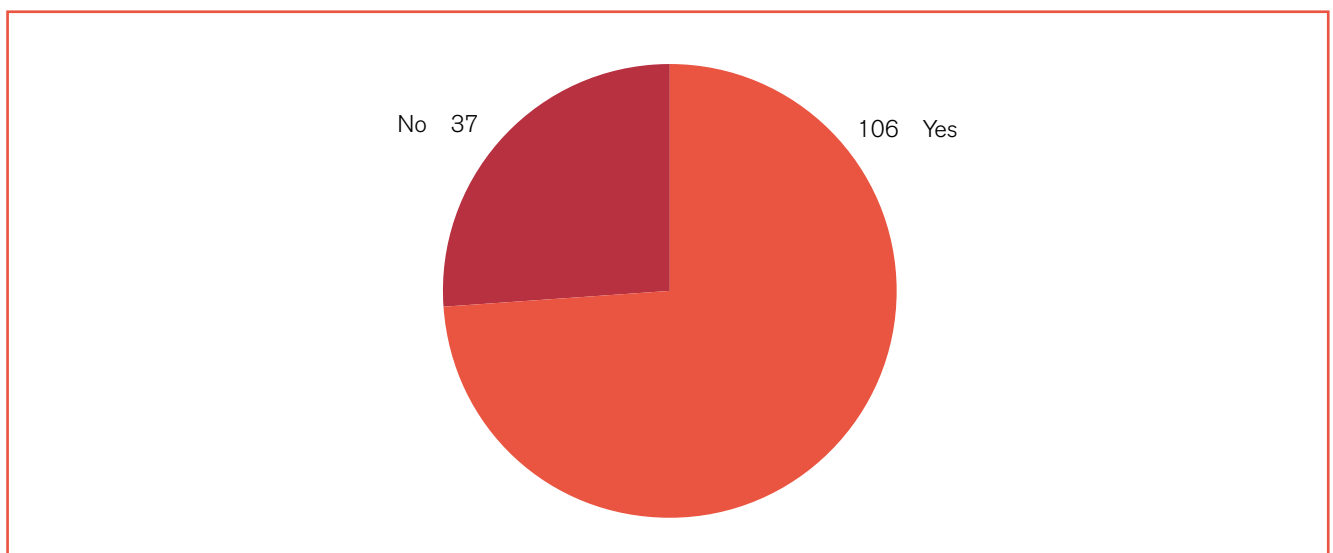
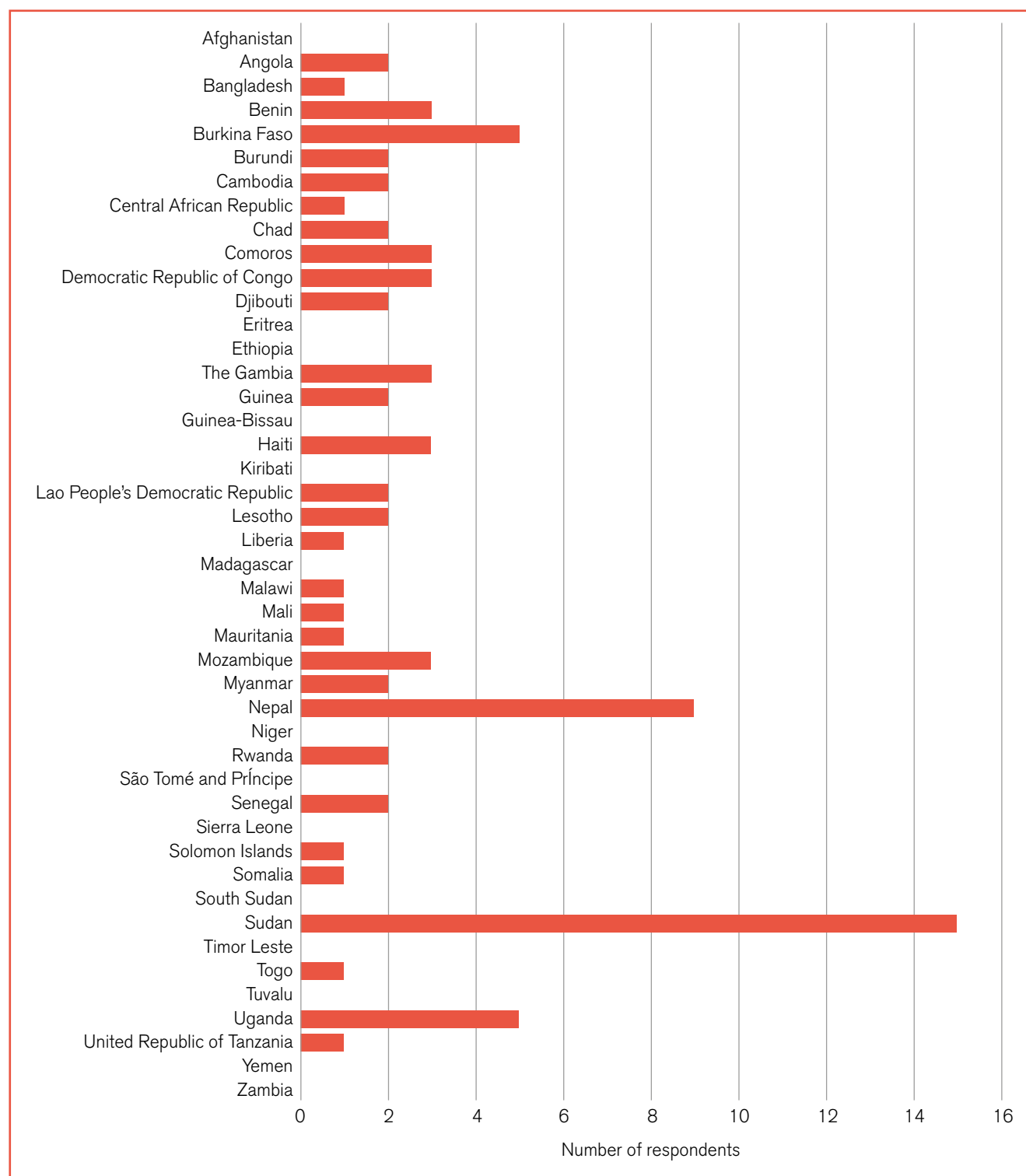


Figure 6. Survey respondents per LDC



We asked respondents to self-identify their roles in relation to the UNFCCC process, as well as their gender. Most (65 or 45%) identified as a former or current negotiator, and the next largest group (33 or 23%), as from an NGO or CSO (see Table 2).

Table 2. Breakdown of respondents, by role and gender

Role	Female	Male	Nonbinary
Negotiator	57 (40%)	8 (6%)	0
UNFCCC national focal point	5 (4%)	1 (1%)	0
UNFCCC Secretariat	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	0
National gender and climate change focal point	18 (13%)	1 (1%)	0
NGO/CSO	27 (19%)	5 (4%)	1 (1%)
Funder	2 (1%)	0	0
Other	12 (8%)	3 (2%)	0
Total	123 (86%)	19 (13%)	1 (1%)

We felt this amount of participation in the survey gave us a good response cohort. Once completed, the French and Portuguese survey data were translated into English and analysed together with the English responses.

The figures in the Section 4 are based on the survey results. As the survey amassed over 100 responses, we reflect values in percentages. We refer to survey participants as **respondents**.

3.3.2 Interviews

We captured more in-depth experiences of participating in the UNFCCC negotiations through stakeholder interviews, which took place in two phases: the first, between April and May 2023; and the second, at the Bonn Climate Change Conference in June 2023. We interviewed 28 people (19 in the first phase and 9 in the second) of whom:

- 19 were women, 9 were men
- 17 were from Africa, 5 from Asia, 1 from the Pacific, 5 from international organisations
- 21 were from LDCs, including Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Comoros, Ethiopia, Kiribati, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Timor Leste, Togo and Uganda, and
- 17 were current or climate negotiators or had been negotiators in the past ten years.

Like the surveys, the interviews were conducted in English, French or Portuguese, according to the interviewee's preference, with the latter two translated and transcribed in English for analysis.

The anonymised quotes in Section 4 are gleaned from the stakeholder interviews. Because our pool of stakeholder interviewees was fewer than 30, we reflect values as numbers rather than percentages (for example, 21 of 28 interviewees). We refer to interview participants as **interviewees**.

3.3.3 Case studies

Each UNFCCC delegation is unique. Working with LDC representatives, we used a case study approach to document best practices for promoting gender balance and meaningful representation across LDC Parties (see Box 2).

4

Findings

This section presents the findings based on the four domains of analysis in the framework presented in Section 3.2. We explore the themes and findings that emerged from the responses on women's participation in the UNFCCC negotiations and barriers experienced at national and global level. We discuss our findings further in Section 5 and propose some recommendations for action and further study.

4.1 Governance

This domain considers the overarching systems and structures that impact citizens' ability to participate freely in the political process. For the purposes of this study, it is about women's participation in climate change decision making. Through stakeholder interviews and our survey, we explored the policies that frame national approaches to participation in governance and those that advance gender equality nationally and in the context of the UNFCCC negotiations. We also explored intersectional disadvantages, asking participants to discuss the influence of external factors such as youth, sex, culture, experience and lack of resources on the national nomination and selection process for attending UNFCCC sessions.

4.1.1 Policy and institutional framework

Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls around the world requires stronger laws, policies and institutions; and countries need to create and implement norms and standards that promote gender equality, women's empowerment and the realisation of their human rights (UN Women 2021a). LDC governments have enacted laws and policies that support gender equity, some with specific quotas to support women's representation (see Box 2), but their implementation has had mixed results.

Box 2. Approaches to tackling barriers to women's participation in the UNFCCC: case studies from Rwanda, Mozambique and Sierra Leone

Case study 1. Addressing the lack of framework for women's involvement in Rwanda by institutionalising a comprehensive approach that supports gender equality and women's empowerment

Through its constitution, specific laws, National Gender Policy and Gender Monitoring Office, Rwanda has built an effective social framework that supports gender equality and women's empowerment, encouraging their involvement in climate change negotiations. Recognising the need for the Gender Monitoring Office — a mechanism that ensures policies and laws are adhered to — is crucial for monitoring progress on gender equality.

Case study 2. Addressing the lack of negotiator qualification criteria in Mozambique by developing criteria to prioritise women in the UNFCCC delegation selection process and enable them to participate meaningfully in negotiations

Mozambique is developing criteria to support women's meaningful participation. Using the Lima Work Program Gender Action Plan as a guide, the main steps include using the influence of a strong gender and climate change focal point, and providing training and raising awareness to increase women's understanding of UNFCCC processes and procedures, improve their ability to prepare proposals and build other skills they need to operate in the negotiation space. Continuity is also key, and the country aims to ensure training is ongoing and that existing or outgoing women negotiators act as mentors to new female negotiators entering the process.

Case study 3. Addressing the lack of structure in the nomination process in Sierra Leone by creating a transparent selection process

While embracing the general approach taken by LDCs, Sierra Leone's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (23 of 2022) provides for a 30% quota for women in employment and decision-making bodies in both the private and public sectors, from private company boards to parliament and local elections. The act also outlines clear steps for developing a standardised approach to delegate nomination and selection. Institutionalising this process through a gender quota increases transparency and decreases bias and the perception of bias in delegate selection.

Of the 28 interviewees, 21 reflected on whether gender and/or advancing gender equality is a priority or is being considered in their country in the context of UNFCCC negotiations. More than half (12) responded positively, and several gave specific examples of laws and policies that aim to increase women's representation in environmental decision making. Interviewees cited many examples of overarching policies that affirm gender as a consideration for participating in governance during the interviews, but several then reflected that, despite being progressive, these policies have not resulted in an increase in the participation of women in UNFCCC delegations. So, while gender-related policies exist, they do not clearly stipulate participation in global forums, and as such, the national criteria and quotas do not apply to UNFCCC negotiations.

"Togo has adopted a law that regulates the participation of women in politics, in almost all the social life, so they are trying to balance the participation and the presence of women in every sector including the negotiation. Though as I said, we are not yet meeting the expected [levels of participation], but I think it's gotten better and better and this is something we can really support." Interviewee #13

"I think there's been a shift and that's changing, but if there's not a deliberate and conscious effort at a national level to address the, you know, decades of gender inequality, then you don't get a shift, and this is true of all countries." Interviewee #9

"We are very rich in policies, the [government] has stated that there should be meaningful participation of not just women but other vulnerable groups. But I haven't seen it speaking any word about participation in the contents like Conference of Parties, Subsidiary Bodies." Interviewee #14

4.1.2 Inadequate access to childcare support

According to International Labour Organization data, the current global rate of female labour force participation stands at approximately 47%, which is 25% lower than the participation rate for men. This significant gender disparity is a result of various obstacles that women encounter, including the responsibilities associated with childcare, or as caregivers within their households, which impacts their participation (Anukriti et al. 2023).

Survey respondents also noted that inadequate childcare support affects women's participation, highlighting that it is linked to financing. For example, one response to an open-ended survey question about whether women are adequately represented at the highest levels in UNFCCC negotiation processes stated:

"No childcare is provided at COP. I am fortunate that I can afford to hire childcare in the host city for my child. I am certain this is a barrier to many female participants. The process for securing accreditation for breastfeeding babies is convoluted and fraught with roadblocks. I attended COP27 with my newborn twins. The first time at registration, they were unable to administer the passes for my infants and I had to return the subsequent day when a more senior administrator had returned to the site."

Only 5% of survey respondents believe the enabling environment for women to attend UNFCCC processes is gender neutral, indicating that it lacks elements that would respond appropriately to the needs of female negotiators.

4.1.3 Intersectional disadvantages

The study also sought to understand intersectional factors that can enhance power dynamics and limit participation. Interviews explored how age, sex, culture, education, and experience affect the selection process. These factors were largely linked to cultural norms based on stereotypes of the way women and young people are viewed in society.

Research shows that children, adolescents and youth are uniquely impacted by climate change. But in the eyes of policymakers and legacy industries, people under 30 have too little experience and knowledge to add value to systems-level decisions and are often excluded (Kajumba et al. 2023). Young respondents reported that it is not easy to be selected as negotiators due to the belief that young people do not have the capabilities to engage effectively in the negotiation processes; they are viewed as inexperienced and therefore not prioritised.

Half (8 of 19) of the interviewees who answered the question on how youth, sex, culture, experience and lack of resources impact the selection process reflected on cultural expectations that impact women's participation in the UNFCCC.

"They will say that [the youth] are inexperienced, that someone older can do it. But I think it's young people who really need to be engaged now, to use their energy, their spirit, their creativity to play a role in these discussions. And so we often tend to relegate youth to second place. Even more so if they're women. [...] So women often find it hard, even if they're really determined to speak out. Fear, as well as education and culture really stop things from moving forward." Interviewee #7

"We still have the experience that youth are just listeners, not really playing that role of leaders or decision makers. So that's what I can say about the cultural experience. [...] we still, in our country, we have the same like cultural practices on the women and the youth. We strongly believe that it's a male-dominated culture, so sometimes that effects [sic] the selection process because more men will be chosen." Interviewee #15

At least two respondents mentioned cultural expectations and beliefs that women should not speak in the presence of men, women have less power in decision making than men, and that women and youth should make way for their elders, particularly older men. The lack of resources to fund participation and women's access to these resources are common themes explored throughout this report, particularly in Section 4.2. While the overall policy landscape in many LDCs aims to advance gender equality — at least on paper — when those policies interact with a scarcity of financial resources for participating in international decision making and political and cultural factors, men are most likely to be selected as UNFCCC delegates.

4.2 Gender-based education and assets

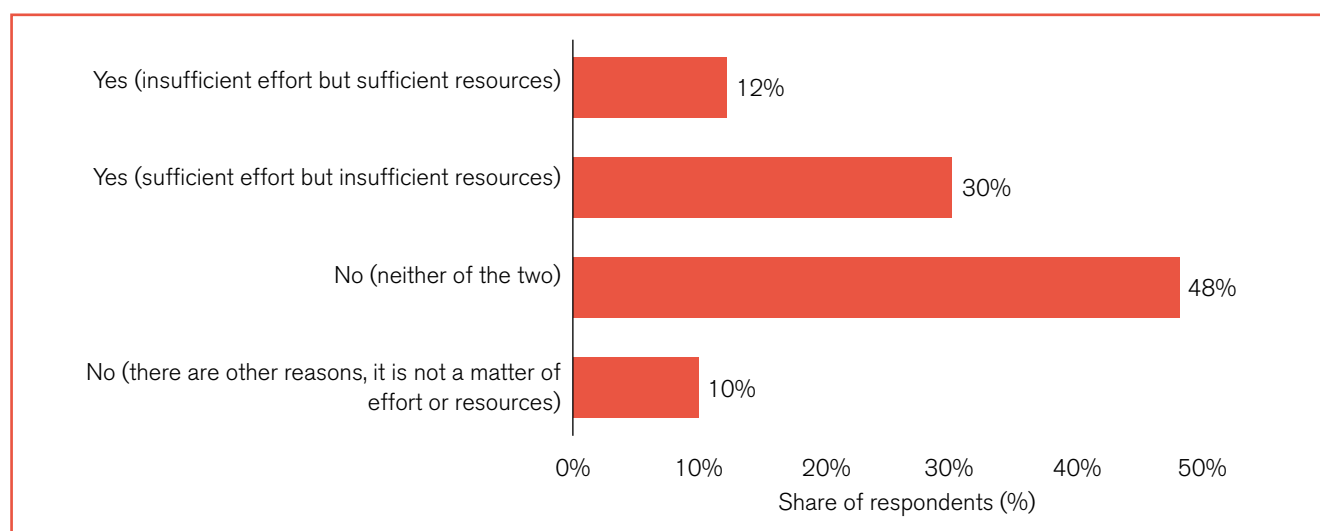
This domain considers the financial resources, education and other forms of support required to effectively engage in environmental decision making at the UNFCCC negotiations and whether access to this support differs for women and men.

4.2.1 Financial resources

Research has shown that the socioeconomic status of women plays a significant role in their participation and representation in political decision-making bodies. A lack of financial resources restricts poor women's opportunities and confidence to risk competing for, and maintaining, leadership. A lack of funding is an important obstacle to women's leadership, and can be compounded by other factors, such as unequal status in society and failing to gain full support from institutional leaders, who are mostly men (Mlambo et al. 2019; Oxfam GB 2008).

When asked whether sufficient resources were in place and whether their governments make enough effort to support women's participation in the UNFCCC negotiation process, particularly in Africa and Asia, nearly half (48%) of our survey respondents said there was a shortage on both fronts. The second-largest group of respondents (30%) indicated that governments make enough effort, but resources are insufficient. So, 78% of survey respondents believe that there are insufficient resources to support women's participation in UNFCCC negotiations (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Survey responses to the question: “Are there sufficient resources in place and effort being made by governments to support women’s participation, particularly women from regions with lower participation (such as Africa and Asia)?”



The survey did not ask respondents to define resources and government efforts. But when we asked interviewees whether their government allocates funds for negotiators — particularly female negotiators — to participate in negotiation processes, 13 of the 21 who responded to this question noted that their governments do not allocate funding to support negotiators to participate in UNFCCC processes. Three said that their governments allocate some funding to support participation, and two (from different countries) stated that their governments used to do so, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Three did not know. The majority stated that their delegations' participation in the UNFCCC negotiations relied entirely on external sources of funding.

“The government does not support. Most of our delegation gets support through the UNFCCC, for the national focal point and the other person. As you might know, for the LDCs they support mainly two to three people.” Interviewee #6

“With the government, I don't think we [have] a dedicated fund. It's just through the support from development partners that we have the financial support to do training or participate in the negotiations.” Interviewee #15

Several interviewees noted that, even when funding is available, female negotiators would not be at the top of the list because there are not many of them, they are not in decision-making positions and, nominees are usually expected

from institutions that have no female staff. One stated that the UNFCCC gender and climate change focal point is not funded by their country and must find their own funding to participate.

The responses indicate that most LDC delegations rely heavily on external funding to support their delegations' participation in the UNFCCC negotiations. When we asked survey respondents to reflect on whether financial support from the UNFCCC or CSOs for women's participation in negotiation processes was readily accessible, 43% answered "no", 32% were not aware that there were funds available to support women's participation, and only 14% answered "yes". This is marginally higher than the 11% who knew of the existence of such funds but did not know whether these were readily accessible.

The overwhelming theme of responses in this domain of analysis pointed to the lack of finance playing an important role in limiting LDC participation in the UNFCCC negotiations, particularly for women. Even when institutions provide training and capacity building for negotiators, trained negotiators cannot use their skills unless they have funding to attend UNFCCC negotiations.

Interviewees and respondents noted that their governments operate with limited finances and are often unable to allocate money to fully or partially support negotiators. As a result, negotiators have to rely on financial support programmes, such as the Women Delegates Fund facilitated by WEDO and bilateral or multilateral donors. Not only do these organisations or actors support negotiators' travel costs; they can also help them access negotiator training.

Although these efforts narrow the financing gap, the extent to which the funds respond to key gender needs is unclear and not well documented. This means that the gender responsiveness of funds may be limited in terms of fund structure, the way they are disbursed, and who can access them. Further research on resource distribution issues and the impact of such funding might generate further insights that can help shape a financing ecosystem that includes women's participation in negotiations, as well as funding for other initiatives focusing on intersectional dimensions of gender and climate change.

4.2.2 Equal access to education and skills

Women require knowledge, skills and capabilities to gain the power to change their own lives and the world around them, including their own consciousness, self-esteem and aspirations in the nonformal sphere (CARE 2023). Women's voices rely on individual and collective capabilities to strengthen their agency. These are shaped by life experiences and embedded in the wider sociocultural context. In the study, we analysed the impact of education and skills on participation.

Our survey asked respondents to reflect on how the requirements for participating in UNFCCC negotiation processes may affect women's participation. In open-ended responses, they linked training to negotiation skills, indicating that women need more training to build their negotiation capabilities and more opportunities to participate in the negotiation process. They also highlighted a lack of clarity around the skills and qualifications required for selection as a negotiator. Female delegates are often unable to participate in UNFCCC processes due to a perceived lack of capacity, which can include a lack of experience, knowledge of the topic and specific themes, exposure in and to the negotiation process itself, and expertise or skills that may be needed on an ad hoc basis.

One respondent noted that traditional women's roles, the traditional view that women lack technical capacity to engage in the relevant topics under negotiation, and their perceived tendency to avoid adversarial roles and situations all lead to women being left out of the negotiation processes. The majority of respondents (53%) believe that women do meet the requirements, and that these therefore do not pose a barrier to their participation; rather, the problem is that few women are nominated to represent their country in the first place. More than a quarter (25.4%) believe that women's inability to meet the requirements inhibits their participation in the negotiations, while 11.2% believe that, while the requirements do form a barrier, women still have ample opportunities to be nominated. Nobody was clear on what those requirements are and whether they are related to skills or education.

The survey also found that the percentage of women working in environment and climate change is low, particularly in key technical and leadership positions. Women form the majority of the agricultural labour force in developing countries and are often on the frontline of climate change, experiencing the worst of its impacts on their livelihoods, wellbeing and economic status (FAO 2023). At community level, they are often responsible for managing smallholdings and engaged

in producing fuel, crops and forest products, and women — particularly Indigenous women — play an important role in stewardship of the land, protecting biodiversity and increasing resilience to climate change.

But climate shocks can hinder girls' access to education, leading them to fall behind boys and ultimately preventing them from formalising their traditional knowledge (Bryan et al. 2023). To engage in environmental work at government level, people usually need qualifications in science and technology. And, as fewer women are qualified in these areas, they are unable to take up positions in the departments that are responsible for climate and environment issues in their countries.

4.2.3 Formal and informal systems of support

We asked interviewees to reflect on any formal or informal systems of support provided for female negotiators. The most-mentioned types of support were externally provided training, mentoring and participation funding for female delegates. These include IIED's mentoring system, which provides guidance for new LDC negotiators, especially women, and trainings organised by IIED and WEDO, which provide better understanding of the process and mentoring on speaking skills.

"I know the Women Delegates Fund; they host a training — a night school. That's the one I benefited from most. I've also been able to benefit from the [European Capacity Building Initiative] and IIED training. [The United Nations Institute for Training and Research] also has a training. Those are the ones I know. But within the UNFCCC, we also have the women in leadership positions network. It's not really providing formal training but kind of peer-to-peer support and also some mentorship. That's kind of very informal training, people get inspired." Interviewee #8

An enabling environment at national level and within the UNFCCC would majorly influence women's participation in negotiations. But the existing environments at both levels tend to maintain the status quo from past decades, particularly power dynamics between countries and groups of people. Open-ended responses to our survey on whether and how respondents thought the institutional frameworks that are in place discourage women from being involved in negotiation processes noted that existing national systems and practices do not favour women's participation — for example:

"National governments do not choose women to participate in the negotiations because they actively select men for positions of leadership and depending on the government of the day, women will be chosen for lower roles."

This does not provide a supportive environment for women to strengthen their agency; it also makes it difficult for women to take up positions in environment or climate change departments due to a lack of formal training in the necessary fields.

Gender and social norms also play a role in participation and decision making. Survey respondents noted that decision makers in most LDCs tend to be male and it is difficult for women to attain decision-making positions due to care roles, societal traditions and workplace environments that are not supportive of women. They revealed that, in many LDCs, women are expected to take full responsibility for domestic affairs, from childcare to home management and elderly care. The socially constructed belief that women are best suited to the domestic sphere still impacts how and when women have equal access to positions of leadership, decision making and power.

The complexity of formal and informal institutions, mechanisms, relationships, and processes that support individuals to meaningfully participate sometimes do not support women's engagement.

4.3 Gender-based rights and participation

This domain examines two areas: the UNFCCC delegate nomination and selection process and the existence (or lack of) criteria or guidance for the nomination process. It also examines the spaces, groups or networks that women need to be involved in to be considered an ideal choice as negotiator and explores women's ability to engage in leadership in UNFCCC decision-making roles, and how these differ from men's.

4.3.1 Selection criteria for nominating delegates

Research suggests that fewer women are selected than men due to a combination of factors, including qualifications and elite leaders' lack of willingness to select female candidates. The literature on collaborative governance also notes a desire or willingness among those in power to self-select, create opportunities for themselves or constraints for others, or build an opportunity structure that favours the engagement of some over others (Krook 2010; Skouteris et al. 2024).

Although we did not find clear policies for nominating COP delegates, we did find a range of selection processes. In most countries, the nomination process and competence criteria are unwritten and unclear. Our interviewees did not specify any standard guidelines for delegate selection. None of the 21 interviewees from 17 LDCs knew of a document that guided the process of forming national UNFCCC delegations. And like the nomination process, the levels of qualification, competency, skill or expertise required for selection are not always standardised.

When asked whether there is a document to guide the process of nominating delegates, most interviewees discussed overarching practices or steps taken to secure their nominations and reflected on women's participation or lack thereof. For example:

"As far as I know, in my country, there is not any standard document or policy that guides the process. Nominations are done based on the requirements and on a need basis. And on a pressure basis. [...] We don't have that guideline or any policies that guide us to select any negotiators, but it's on the informal basis." Interviewee #14

"Currently there is no standard procedure, but there are guidelines for if you are nominated, what you need to do or what you can do. Very broad guidelines exist, but a nomination standard doesn't exist. They also talk about gender, but during the sessions here there's no women, we don't see them. [...] There is no challenging of nominations made. Since we do not have proper guidelines or rules, it's all in the prerogative rights of the head of delegations or the [Permanent] Secretary to decide." Interviewee #5

"They should have different policies; I mean they should have a separate policy that guides the selection of negotiators. Participation for the COP is sometimes a headache because, due to some political and other unforeseen pressure, people who haven't been following the negotiations get the opportunity due to their power. So maybe there should be a guideline, strict guideline that countries should strictly follow while selecting negotiators." Interviewee #14

Other interviewees noted that access to travel funds has more influence on who gets nominated than policies or guidelines. This could be because most of the travel funds are provided by development partners who are external to government processes, and it is not possible to challenge them on who they fund. One acknowledged that, while there are gender mandates in UNFCCC decisions that promote the goal of gender balance within delegations, the process is Party-driven and has many elements of country ownership, which could explain the lack of guidelines about how to approach the composition of delegations in terms of skills, experiences, roles and responsibilities, and gender, geographical and other types of balance. Interviewees noted that, unless funding is specifically dedicated for women — most of whom do not occupy influential positions in government — they would not be selected as part of the delegation.

Sierra Leone is working to address the lack of guidelines on negotiator selection criteria and process. Although challenges remain, the national focal point is using the new Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (2022)¹⁰ to increase women's representation at the COPs and other UNFCCC processes by prioritising women in the delegate selection process, which includes negotiator criteria (see Box 3).

10 <https://www.un.org/sites/www.un.org.africarenewal/files/ACT%20MOGCA.pdf> (PDF).

Box 3. Sierra Leone's nomination process: efforts to increase women's participation in the country's UNFCCC delegation

The selection of delegates begins when the invitation — which includes the thematic areas — is received. Sierra Leone is focusing on the process below to ensure the inclusion of women.

1. The first members of the delegation are chosen from government employees who are experts in the thematic areas. Efforts are made to include women in the group, though it is not established as a priority. Other experts are taken from the private sector and NGOs or CSOs, who are asked to participate as observers, but need to prove that they will contribute to a specific thematic area before they are approved. There are several youth NGOs working on climate change, and this allows for the inclusion of youth in the delegation.
2. Negotiators are chosen based on their knowledge of the process. Therefore, only people who have completed the negotiator training are selected as negotiators.
3. To secure funding for the delegation, a list of those selected from the government ministries is submitted to the Ministry of Finance. The UNFCCC supports LDC delegations by funding two spots. All other members of the delegation must be funded by the government or donors.
4. To prioritise women, Sierra Leone will use as a guide the newly established laws on gender quotas. The *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, number 23 of 2022* aims to address gender imbalances by making provision for increased appointment of women to decision-making positions and structures to achieve 30% representation.

Institutionalising such a process will provide a clear and transparent application of delegate selection criteria and will likely reduce perceptions of bias or political influence.

Interviewees also highlighted different factors that their countries consider, noting that they tend to prioritise government officials, and that delegates should be experts in some subject matter or have been working with the government for a few years. They also reported that political and bureaucratic pressure can bring in hidden and undocumented criteria that influence the selection of negotiators.

"People nominated are those who are working on climate change at home. Even those working on other sectors must be involved in climate change, so that's where you have your negotiators from. [...] It is important to have continuity in issues because the UNFCCC process is very complex — you must come time after time so that you understand what's going on. So, it is very important, but in a number of countries, attending meetings is not on the basis of relevance to what you're doing. Sometimes it's used as an incentive to government officers so that will bring rotation into issues — so that if it was you last time, next time it's another one so that we all benefit. So those are the issues that you would encounter, especially for many LDCs without the policies that guide how nomination is made."

Interviewee #1

Some interviewees noted that their countries prioritise gender and women's representation in political leadership and delegations:

"Even in our delegation, there are 20% men and the women are 80%. Women and men have the same process."

Interviewee #2

But others raised concerns that, where women are very poorly represented, they need to prove that they have the right skills, and as a result, need to work harder than men to show that they are committed and active in the process to be considered. Others had concerns that, if countries do determine selection criteria, they will also need to consider specific meaningful variables, to avoid the tokenisation of women's leadership and participation.

"We've worked with delegates before who have been on Party badges that have unfortunately, instead of having access to negotiation rooms, been assigned responsibilities working in Party pavilion. And so, I am wary of how quickly a more robust process could be stood up." Interviewee #23

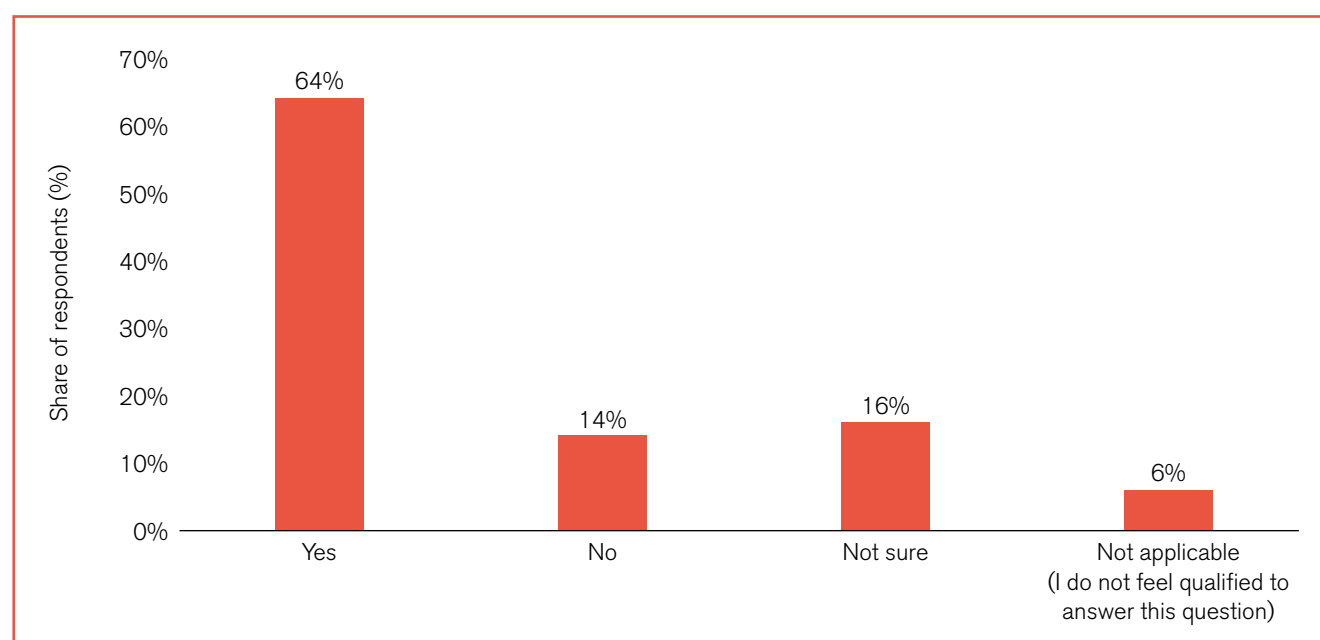
Although many countries now have gender and climate change focal points, the interconnected challenges that they face — including the nomination of few gender experts, a lack of funding and not being involved in the nomination process — mean that they cannot influence the delegation selection process.

4.3.2 Women's ability to engage and participate

Research suggests that some women may be reluctant to pursue certain tasks because they lack confidence in their ability to succeed (Dickerson and Taylor 2000). While gender-related barriers and biases have declined over the years, gender stereotypes continue to create challenges in the progress of women's careers. The availability of opportunities for career progression for women continues to be negatively affected by such stereotypes, which shape managerial behaviour and occupational outlooks in the workplace with patriarchal expectations. In some organisational settings, negative beliefs about women's performance or efficacy may also damage their aspiration for career advancement or participation (Tabassum and Nayak 2021; Dickerson and Taylor 2000).

Our survey asked respondents to reflect on why women's participation in the UNFCCC negotiations is lower than men's, particularly in LDCs. The vast majority (93%) said they think that more women are interested in participating in the UNFCCC processes and roles beyond those currently engaged, and 86% thought that existing institutional frameworks discourage women from being involved in negotiation processes. Most respondents (64%) said that there are barriers to women's active involvement in climate negotiations (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Survey responses to the question: “Are there barriers preventing women from taking on more active roles or being more involved in ongoing work related to climate change and the UNFCCC negotiations?”



In the interviews, we explored why women are discouraged from participating more fully in the UNFCCC process. Of the 20 stakeholders who reflected on whether there are written policies and guidelines in place at the COP and other events/committees that act as a hurdle to participation, nine said there are no policies that act as a hurdle to women's participation; four said they do not know; two answered yes; and five chose to reflect on broader limitations to women's participation — the length of time involved in preparing for and engaging in the UNFCCC processes, and the impact of gender norms — which we explore below.

Length of time involved in preparing for and engaging in UNFCCC processes

While the lack of finance was a major issue, time is another limiting factor on women's engagement and participation, and is interlinked with a lack of financing. As interviewees noted, COPs and the related negotiation processes are both time- and resource-intensive.

“One [limitation] is the length of the process. There was a female who wanted to come for the COP, but she told me that it's four weeks. Because we go one week in Ghana for a visa process and then three weeks here and they have a young child. So, the length of the process tends to be a constraint. Especially for some of us that are getting a visa in a different country. [...] The other thing is that we don't get the agenda ahead of time, the entire agenda. You can get the agenda, but not the timeframe to know on which day you're going to start gender [negotiations], etc.”

Interviewee #4

Participating in a COP does not only involve the two weeks at the meeting itself. The entire process — from preparatory training and meetings to post-COP debriefings — can span a month, and the financial and time costs have implications on negotiators' livelihoods and responsibilities. Both male and female respondents noted that the implications are different for men and women.

Impact of gender norms

When examining the issue of gender inequality, it is necessary to consider the underlying drivers that allow sex-based disparities in access to resources, power and opportunities to endure. These can be structural and systemic or can relate to social norms and gendered stereotypes (Stewart et al. 2021). Gender roles, expectations and stereotypes relating to the nature of the negotiations and what women can, cannot or should do also emerged strongly from the interviews. It is worth noting that some of the interviewees were male UNFCCC focal points and shared their perceptions of the challenges women experience. For example, one said:

“I don't know of policies. But I also know our domestic settings could be a barrier to women participating. We have had cases where climate change negotiations or activities will be attended by women, and the family will be complaining that the mother and wife is always not home. [...] The other thing that makes women not enjoy climate change negotiations is the fact that it is too intense. We've had women nominated before. They attend COP and they tell you that, I will not attend this again. Because it's so busy going from meeting room to meeting room with the type of shoes [they] put on. It's hectic. So maybe the nature of the work also is gender biased. [...] And I know a lot of ladies would not want to be away from their kids for a long time.” Interviewee #1

Other interviewees noted patriarchal biases and that those responsible for nominations are male and tend to nominate male colleagues. Others highlighted traditional views that women lack technical capacity to engage in the topics under negotiation and are therefore not given opportunities to engage. If there are no spaces to challenge such biases, these perceptions are allowed to persist, impacting the likelihood of women being nominated.

4.4 Leadership and decision making

This domain focuses on women's agency and impact on the UNFCCC once they reach the negotiating table. It also explores what constitutes meaningful or effective participation within the negotiation processes and whether it is different for women and men.

4.4.1 Women's agency

Women's agency continues to be limited in many contexts. On average, women in low- and middle-income countries report having less freedom of choice, less control over their own lives and fewer decision-making opportunities than men in their own country and women in wealthier countries (Kabeer 1999; Jayachandran 2015; Donald et al. 2020). Feminist climate justice activists have advocated for women's participation in climate action as a right, given that climate mitigation and adaptation measures disregard women's agency and the vital contributions of women's collective action (IDLO 2022).

Building the agency of women and other disadvantaged groups allows relationships between them to change and transforms both formal and informal structures to enable women to realise their full potential in both their public and private lives, ensuring they can equally contribute to, and benefit from, social, political and economic development. Our study findings indicate that decision making is in the hands of male civil servants, and few women are in a position where they can help set goals on equitable participation or the UNFCCC delegation selection process.

Women's interaction with others is key to managing power dynamics and enabling equitable social, political and economic relationships in the public sphere and social spaces. As we have mentioned elsewhere, the policies reviewed across LDCs indicate that, while many make provisions to support women's participation and have specified quotas, they do not apply these to the selection of UNFCCC negotiators.

When asked about what spaces, groups or networks people need to be involved in to be considered an ideal choice as negotiator, and whether these differ for women and men, none of the interviewees referred to specific, written criteria. But several themes emerged from their reflections on this same question, including a preference for those working on climate change as part of their job role and having expertise and experience in the field.

A supportive environment was noted as key to raising women's confidence to fully participate in the UNFCCC negotiation process. Enablers that emerged in discussions include having nomination criteria in place, creating supportive spaces for women (for example, through the UNFCCC's code of conduct), ensuring women can develop the necessary expertise and skills, providing funding and addressing power dynamics.

4.4.2 Meaningful participation of women in the UNFCCC processes

Meaningful participation involves sharing power and control over priority-setting, policymaking, resource allocation and access to public goods and services. Some consider certain forms of affirmative action, such as quotas, as tokenistic and symbolic actions that make women add-ons (Paffenholz et al. 2016), while others argue that quotas and other temporary special measures can be essential to get women in the room where decisions take place because their presence is often directly resisted.

It is important to note that a frequency or head count of female participants merely provides the number of women that were present and is not a primary determinant of their influence (UN Women and UNDP 2022).

Measuring the effectiveness of women's participation across the UNFCCC, rather than just the number of women involved, requires deeper analysis. For example, at the UNFCCC COP26, an impressive 45% of the United Kingdom's delegation were women. But analysis of their responsibility revealed that most held roles related to event organisation or as advisors to the main decision makers. Only 2 of the 12-strong leadership team were women, and the majority of the most senior decision-making and public-facing roles were taken by men.

Understanding meaningful participation

Reflecting on whether they believed women have meaningfully participated in the UNFCCC negotiations, we asked interviewees what constitutes meaningful or effective participation within negotiation processes, and whether this different for men and women. Of the 23 interviewees who offered reflections on this subject, 5 said women's participation has been meaningful and cited examples, including the former UNFCCC executive secretary, Christiana Figueres, who led the years of negotiations that culminated in the adoption of the Paris Agreement, and other women who lead delegations and co-facilitate the negotiation of specific UNFCCC agenda items. Two stated that women's participation in the negotiations has not been meaningful:

"In my observation, I don't think that women's participation in the UNFCCC process is meaningful. It is improving but not enough progress has been done. Providing more training, education and opportunities to women can help in increasing participation." Interviewee #28

As they reflected on how to improve women's participation, three mentioned the need for capacity building, including training and education, and two noted that the UNFCCC should enforce standards for gender-balanced delegations. One recommended that the UNFCCC should train all national focal points twice a year on gender equality and noted the importance of empowering women and bringing more women to the decision-making table. Another suggested that further research on how to measure meaningful participation is needed. We return to these recommendations in Section 5.

Most interviewees commented on what constitutes meaningful participation in the UNFCCC negotiations, with some speaking of the need to raise your voice, speak and intervene on behalf of your country in the discussions. Most reflected that meaningful participation is the ability to follow the technical process of the negotiations and move the discussion forward.

“For me, meaningful participation in the negotiation process really means being able to bring ideas to the table and contribute to the discussions to help us move forward. And for me, that's real participation. Because just being there and observing is not participating.” Interviewee #7

“Meaningful participation is to take an active role in the negotiations and the events happening here. It could be just providing information to the negotiators, providing backstopping support, taking the floor, submitting your name for elections, taking leadership positions or co-facilitating.” Interviewee #8

“It includes interventions, networking, bringing resources, enhancing the partnership between two Parties or two NGOs. It includes resources sharing and maybe also some collaborative academic research. So, there could be many forms of meaningful participation.” Interviewee #14

“For the negotiations, meaningful participation is the ability to voice your concerns and be heard. And for you to feel that your intervention has been heard and reflected, and people are to be able to understand clearly what you want. I think for me, that's meaningful engagement. And that's what everyone has to aim for when you're in the negotiations. You should aim to make a difference. For example, if you are a coordinator for the LDCs, speak for them, and reflect the challenges LDCs are facing and the solutions there are, so that everyone buys in and convinces others to agree. I think that's meaningful engagement. And that cuts across to all males and females.” Interviewee #6

Experiences of meaningful participation

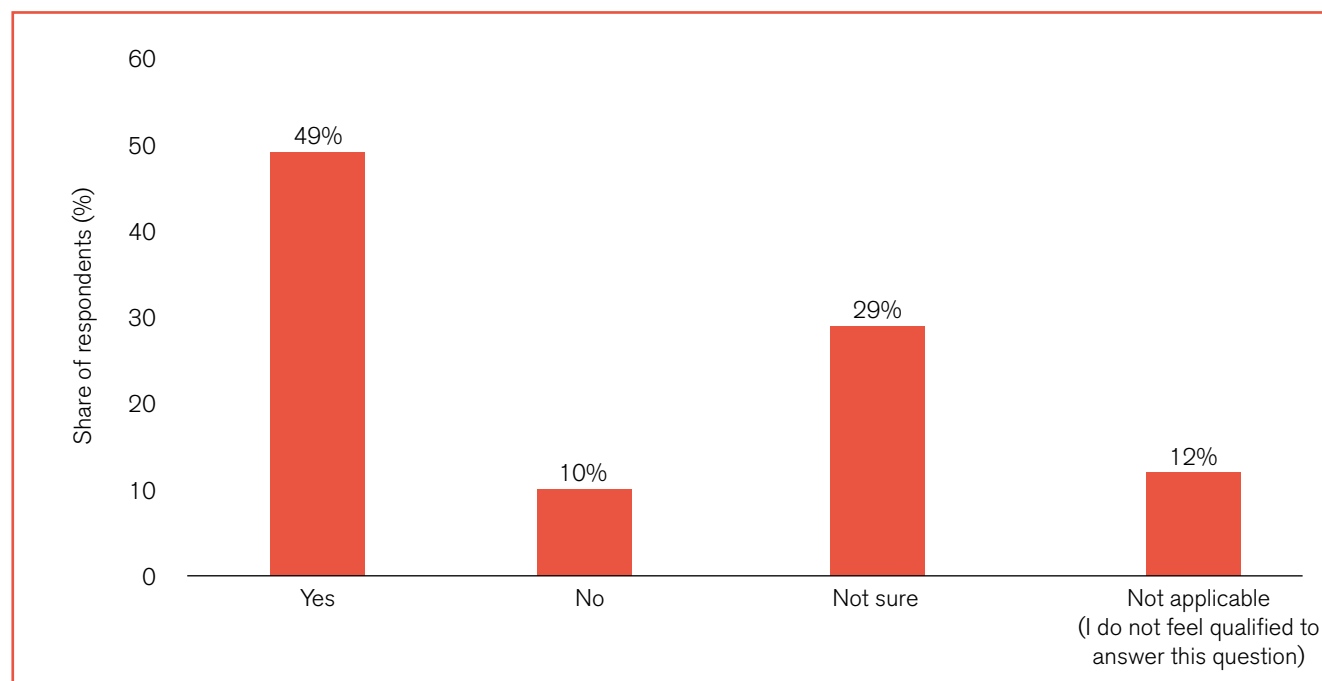
Although most interviewees reflected on the differences between women and men, no prevailing theme came through. One remarked that having a gender-diverse delegation is beneficial. Another stated they did not know whether there is a difference. Three stated outright that meaningful participation is different for women and men, and four said that meaningful participation is not different for women and men. For example:

“I don't know [if meaningful participation is different for women and men]. The problem maybe is because I'm an empowered woman, so I don't see.” Interviewee #8

“No, I just think that men have a privilege that enables them to more easily participate meaningfully because of their roles in their national delegations anyway, and because [...] there is also an element of not recognising what they don't know. So there's also that element of women wanting to be competent and men not necessarily being conscious of the need to be competent.” Interviewee #9

Survey respondents added further perspectives on how women and men are represented differently at the highest levels of the UNFCCC. When asked whether they thought that women are adequately represented at the highest levels in UNFCCC negotiation processes, and why, 28 (20%) indicated that women are adequately represented and 94 (66%) said that they are not, offering a range of reasons for this low representation in their open-ended responses. These included a lack of funding and resources, limited involvement in leadership and decision-making roles, ineligibility due to not possessing the required skills and poor commitment to supporting women's involvement.

Figure 9. Survey responses to the question: “Are women overlooked for formal roles in UNFCCC negotiation committees?”



Some respondents also noted that consistent and repeat attendance ensures meaningful participation, allowing delegates to effectively participate in negotiations, build up the necessary understanding of technical thematic areas, develop their skills and build the connections and influence they need to navigate the complex nature of the negotiations.

One interviewee noted that a new negotiator entering this space would lack the experience and skills needed to operate in the negotiation space. This can lead to gaps in the skills and experience they need to participate meaningfully and successfully. They felt that men have more opportunities to gain such experience while women, as a group, are often left behind as they tend to participate less frequently than male negotiators.

5

Discussion and recommendations

Exploring the causes of gender imbalance in country systems and processes to understand the imbalances in the climate negotiations at the global level, our study findings provide significant insights into understanding the causes of low representation of women in the UNFCCC processes. This section interprets the findings, discusses their relevance in the context of participation and explains limitations, before making recommendations and suggesting areas for further research.

5.1 Discussion and conclusions

Numerous assessments of UNFCCC delegations are carried out from a gender perspective each year, mostly at global level. And, while women's participation in the UNFCCC has generally been low, for women from LDCs, it has been lower, on average, than other regions. To understand the prevailing reasons behind this gender imbalance, this report uses four domains of analysis to investigate the underlying factors that contribute to the low representation of women through a survey and interviews with stakeholders, predominately from LDCs. Their responses and reflections give insight to the LDC experience of delegation selection and explores of why the gender imbalance persists in the UNFCCC negotiations.

5.1.1 Governance

Previous studies have noted that gender equality and decentralisation policies have been significant in increasing women's representation at local level, and that women's inclusion in governance systems and structures has a strong normative value, accompanied by the expectation that it should improve governance outputs. Our study findings show that, while most LDCs have gender policies and provisions for quotas, these have not advanced women's participation in UNFCCC negotiations. Other studies show that adopting gender quotas has significantly changed country trends in women's representation at national and local levels, but this does not translate to full and effective participation or influence. Our study findings show that LDCs do not even consider the quotas when it comes to representation on international levels. A few countries are starting to use their policy frameworks to improve representation, but it is too early to assess the outcomes.

The nomination of gender and climate change focal points is meant to improve visibility and influence for gender equity, but our findings show that these focal points have neither power nor influence when it comes to deciding nominees for participation in the UNFCCC negotiations. In some cases, they are not even gender experts; rather, they were nominated because of their position. Clarity of roles and rules of engagement are important to avoid tokenism.

Gender biases and intersectional factors outside the policy and institutional framework also hinder women's participation. Other studies note that social characteristics, such as age, ethnic background, gender and economic status, can be strong constraining factors that limit women's participation, the way they participate, their level of influence and their ability to benefit from collective action, public engagement and decision making. Similarly, our findings highlight the barriers related to age, gender roles, expectations and stereotypes in relation to the nature of the negotiations and what women can, cannot or should do. We noted differences in responses by women and men, informed by their socialisation and lived experiences.

5.1.2 Gender-based education and assets

Studies indicate that women and girls require knowledge, skills and capabilities to gain the power to change their own lives and the world around them, including their consciousness, self-esteem and aspirations. Our findings show that a perceived and actual lack of skills and knowledge in relation to negotiation processes is a key barrier to women's participation. While support for training junior negotiators is provided externally, the lack of consistency in participation in consecutive COPs means that women cannot gain experience in the long term. Being offered opportunities for nomination and being funded to travel directly influence the way women's capabilities are built in the long term.

There are few women working in the climate and environment sectors at leadership levels, which affects their likelihood of being selected to join UNFCCC delegations. Although climate change is an issue that cuts across sectors, our findings indicate that countries tend to nominate people for the UNFCCC negotiations who are working in the climate and environment sectors specifically. This aligns with the literature reviewed and emphasises the need to support women and girls in science, technology, engineering and maths, and for decision makers to understand the crosscutting nature of climate change.

We also found that financial barriers are key. This aligns with the literature, which finds that the socioeconomic status of women plays a significant role in enhancing their participation and representation in political decision-making bodies. From an institutional perspective, finances play a big role in negotiator selection, influencing decisions on who gets funded. The UNFCCC funds only two people per delegation and LDC governments cannot afford to support all their delegates. Most negotiators are therefore funded by development partners, through projects or programmes that might have some budget allocated to attendance at the negotiations, but do not necessarily have a gender-based criteria for selecting who they fund. And because few women lead programmes funded by development partners, they are less likely to be among those that get funded. The formal and informal systems of support for women to participate are also inadequate. The literature highlights bullying and harassment of women at UNFCCC level. Although this did not come out in our study findings, responses noted that existing national systems and practices do not favour women's participation; that more men tend to be selected than women; and that when they are selected, women are often assigned junior roles.

5.1.3 Gender-based rights and participation

Research suggests that fewer women are selected than men due to a combination of factors, including qualifications and a lack of willingness among elite leaders to select female candidates. Our study findings indicate a lack of nomination criteria, which compromises the process. Determining factors include access to funds, as discussed in Section 5.1.2, for which there is also no criteria. Even though policies to advance gender equity are in place at global level, negotiator nomination is country-driven, so change is needed at that level.

Power imbalances are also an issue, especially with individuals who have been in the negotiation process continuously and hold decision-making power. Without guidelines, the process will continue to exclude those with less power, especially women and youth.

Research suggests that some women may be reluctant to pursue certain tasks because they lack confidence in their ability to succeed. Our study findings indicate barriers related to the nature of the UNFCCC COP processes that conflict with traditional gender roles, limiting women's participation. Long periods of preparation, travel and post-COP engagements make it difficult for women with care responsibilities to fully engage with the process, and intermittent participation can hamper their opportunity for selection.

While gender-related barriers and biases have declined over the years, gender stereotypes continue to challenge the progress of women's careers. For example, one interviewee shared the perception that the process is too intense for women, who get tired moving between rooms wearing high-heeled shoes, and concluded that women do not want to attend because the process is cumbersome. Such generalisations by key decision makers can hinder women's participation.

Our study findings indicate that gendered sociocultural norms are also barriers to participation, with respondents noting the influence of family expectations on women being at home, which hinders women's engagement due to care responsibilities. Childcare support and implied financial costs were also mentioned as a challenge for women, especially those who cannot afford childcare support while at COP.

Other intersectional characteristics, such as age and income levels, can affect participation. Findings show that young people struggle to be selected as negotiators due to the belief that they do not have the capabilities to engage effectively in the negotiation process. They also noted difficulties with finding funds to support their travel, visa and other needs, especially where they do not have stable incomes. Our findings do not align with the UNFCCC findings that female Party delegates accounted for the majority of delegates in the under 26 age group at the most recent UNFCCC sessions and the majority in the 26–35 age group at SB60 across all regions (UNFCCC 2024). This could be because our findings of youth challenges are drawn from individual respondents from LDCs who identify as youth, and not from a specific focus on youth participation globally. The challenges they mention could therefore be individual and country-specific without comparability of youth participation across scale.

5.1.4 Leadership and decision making

Women's lack of agency to set and achieve their goals and engage in empowering relationships is another barrier to participation. The literature shows that, on average, women in low- and middle-income countries report less freedom of choice, less control over their lives and fewer decision-making opportunities than men in their own countries and women in wealthier countries. Our study findings show that decision making is in the hands of male civil servants, and that few women are in positions where they can set goals on equitable participation or influence how the selection process works for UNFCCC COPs. The lived experience of gender norms and patriarchal systems which restrict women's agency came across clearly in the views of our respondents.

Women's interaction with others is key to managing the power dynamics that can affect their participation. Our study findings show that existing systems and practices do not favour women's participation, and the lack of autonomy to make decisions affects women's agency in their work environment, where they do not have the same privileges as men. While women may have the same rights as men on the surface, they do not have the same privileges; nor can they access the same spaces in high-level events. Findings show that women are more often relegated to administrative work, report-writing, overseeing logistics or managing events.

While we explored barriers, our study findings also highlight a lack of confidence, where women themselves do not always feel knowledgeable or adequately prepared to follow the complexities or technical language of the negotiations. Some noted that women's organisations that support women do not equip them to fully engage and understand the technicality and complexity of the COP environment and negotiations; rather, they keep them in the sidelines. Understanding the specific capabilities and nature of support that women need is key. We did not, however, find out the reasons why some women are not keen to engage in the technical aspects of the UNFCCC and acknowledge that they could be due to individual interests and experiences rather than a generalised perception. As such, this issue requires further investigation.

While we explored barriers to participation, we also examined whether participation is meaningful. The literature indicates that participation is a broad concept that can mean different things to different people in terms of process and outcomes. Key concerns include understanding what constitutes legitimate and effective public participation. To achieve procedural justice, there is a need to understand whether — or the extent to which — a process embodies democratic values such as fairness, transparency and attentiveness to stakeholders' concerns.

Our findings show that male and female respondents have different perspectives of what meaningful participation means. This is based on lived experience, privilege, values and social norms that view women and men differently. The results therefore cannot be generalised, as some of the responses were subjective, based on individual experiences

rather than general practice. Some felt that having a few women in leadership positions indicates that there are no barriers to meaningful participation, while others felt that more needs to be done to make participation meaningful for women. Some value being heard — whether speaking individually and on behalf of their constituencies — and making a difference, while others value collectively following the negotiations or supporting the negotiators and ensuring they are moving in the right direction.

The results indicate that women are not a homogenous group. Some of the female respondents noted that their participation is meaningful, and did not see any issues because they are empowered as individuals and do not experience any barriers. But others emphasised the difference between women and men, noting that while women sometimes lack the confidence to express themselves and therefore hold back, men are often less self-conscious and will speak even when they are not very competent in the subject.

Our findings also highlight consistency in participation as a hindrance to meaningful participation. Due to a lack of funds, some negotiators are trained but do not travel for COPs, with women usually more impacted, as there are fewer of them in the delegations and they have fewer opportunities to access resources for travel. We did not dive into a disaggregated understanding of how women and men get funded, but these are the experiences of negotiators impacted by these issues.

5.2 Recommendations and areas for further research

In this section, we outline recommendations for promoting gender balance and the meaningful representation of women, which countries or agencies can contextualise and adapt to their own unique circumstances. We also propose areas for further research, both around the UNFCCC negotiations and in the context of national climate change decision making.

5.2.1 Recommendations for national governments

Develop selection criteria for UNFCCC delegations: National governments could develop formal criteria to guide the nomination of delegations for transparency and equitable representation. Findings showed a lack of criteria in most countries, with a few starting to use gender policies to develop selection criteria. National focal points and national gender and climate change focal points could consider the quotas provided in national gender policies and apply them to the selection process in addition to other parameters.

Implement policy and institutional support for women's participation: National governments that already have gender-responsive policies could implement their policy commitments to support women's meaningful participation at local, national and international levels, including in the UNFCCC process. Countries that have established gender quotas to increase women's participation could apply these to delegation selection criteria to ensure that women are engaged in climate action at all levels. This will increase the number of women engaging in the UNFCCC and build sustainable capability in LDCs.

Institute targeted funding mechanisms to support women and youth: Women and youth face challenges in accessing funding, either due to the positions they hold in government or being unable to access funding information. There is a need for equitable allocation of government and external actor funds to ensure that those usually not funded — including women and youth — are supported to participate.

Increase awareness on the importance of UNFCCC gender mandates at national level: National governments could consider an induction process for national focal points on UNFCCC mandates, including gender-related mandates and their relevance to their roles. This onboarding could be supported by national gender and climate change focal points in collaboration with the UNFCCC Secretariat.

Track gender composition at national level: To enhance gender-responsive climate action, national governments could institutionalise mechanisms to systematically track the gender composition of their UNFCCC delegations, and the roles filled by men and women within them. This responsibility could be formally incorporated into the role of the national gender and climate change focal point, empowering them to collect and analyse data on the nomination and participation of women and men in national delegations to highlight gaps and recommend actions to improve equity in national delegations.

5.2.2 Recommendations for the LDC Group

Promote gender-sensitive selection criteria and support female delegates in the LDC Group: The LDC Group could continue raising awareness of the value and importance of women's participation in climate negotiations and encourage member countries to establish selection criteria that promote gender equality. Once nominated the LDC Group could provide on-demand support to delegates for seamless integration into the Group's coordination system.

Provide targeted trainings on climate change negotiations: Through resource mobilisation and the long-term LDC initiatives, the LDC Group and its partners could support training of officials from national governments and other actors to improve both women's and men's understanding of the UNFCCC process. Ensuring such efforts include a balanced participation of women, men and youth would help build a sustainable and equitable resource pool of negotiators.

5.2.3 Recommendations for the UNFCCC

Refine UNFCCC session logistics and the visa process: UNFCCC COPs and SBs take place over three weeks, including the preparatory week. LDC negotiators also typically have to travel to obtain visas to attend these, adding days — if not weeks — to their time away. Although the length of the negotiation process is exhausting for both women and men, women find the length particularly challenging, given familial caring responsibilities. The UNFCCC and host governments could work to facilitate an expedited visa process for LDC delegates that reduces travel time. If the sessions themselves cannot be shortened, publishing the agendas far enough in advance would help accommodate the visa process, allow delegates to better plan their travel and limit their time away.

Provide childcare support services for negotiators with caregiving responsibilities: Caregiving duties can complicate participation in workshops and meetings, particularly when facilities or funds for childcare services are unavailable. This challenge is disproportionately experienced by women, who have to spend their own funds or, if they cannot afford to pay for these services, miss the opportunity to participate. Providing free childcare services for delegates who need it would create an inclusive environment where care responsibilities do not act as a barrier to participation.

Sensitise UNFCCC national focal points on gender mandates: To support gender-responsive approaches, the UNFCCC Secretariat could enhance efforts to inform national focal points of gender-related mandates, and of the relevance and value of gender in the context of their work. Communicating this information in collaboration with the national gender and climate change focal points would help raise awareness and understanding of their roles.

5.2.4 Recommendations for funders

Increase funding for organisations supporting training and capacity building for women and youth negotiators: Finance is a grave challenge for LDCs, and while development partners provide funding for national government negotiators, this is usually for individuals working on donor-funded programmes. Funders could improve participation rates by making funds available to organisations that support women and other groups of people who are likely to be excluded from the negotiations.

Provide consistent and targeted financial support: There is a need for consistent and targeted funding to support mentoring and coaching, and travel funds to allow consistent participation. Studies show that female negotiators who have consistently attended the negotiations have built their capabilities and been empowered to take up leadership positions where they can claim their own space as senior negotiators.

5.2.5 Areas for further research

Understanding the reasons for lower engagement and interest in technical negotiation: Some women lack confidence and interest in engaging in the technical negotiation process, and some of the organisations supporting women do not support their skills to engage with the negotiations themselves, focusing on sideline events instead. Further examination of the specific capabilities and nature of support that women need would help identify the barriers to women's participation and add to the literature.

Assessing success factors in countries with gender-balanced delegations: Some countries have gender-balanced UNFCCC delegations. While this study did not investigate these case studies, it would be useful to understand what their success factors are and how such lessons can inform other countries with less balanced delegations.

Understanding and measuring meaningful participation: What constitutes meaningful UNFCCC participation and whether this differs for women and men remain open questions, warranting further research. It is important to define what meaningful participation is, how it is tracked and how it continues to evolve under the UNFCCC. As well as tracking sex-aggregated participation in delegations, heads of delegations, and constituted bodies, we need new measurements to assess the quality of women's participation, including data on the amount of time women and men speak at UNFCCC meetings (WEDO 2022). More research on understanding and tracking what LDC delegates define as meaningful participation for women and men would add to this debate.

We hope this report launches further study, experience and lesson-sharing to increase the meaningful participation of women and men from the most vulnerable countries in the international climate change decision-making process.

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Research Report

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This research report examines the underlying factors that contribute to the low representation of women at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, with a focus on least developed countries (LDCs). Noting that LDCs have, on average, lower rates of women participating in UNFCCC negotiations than other regions, we investigate the root causes of this gender imbalance, identifying barriers and highlighting good practices. This report recommends a series of actions for national governments, the LDC Group, the UNFCCC and funders to foster more inclusive and diverse representation in UNFCCC negotiations.

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