

Gender and Climate Justice



Feminists from the Global South and the Global North stress that the climate crisis is a social crisis. The environmental challenges posed by climate change are universal, affecting every nation and community. The climate crisis exacerbates inequality, intensifies poverty, and plunges the world's most marginalised populations into heightened insecurity. This briefing paper describes the relationships between gender and climate justice.

Climate change has been identified as the defining human development issue of our time. While often viewed as a purely scientific and technical phenomenon, climate change is a social, economic and political phenomenon with profound implications for social justice and gender equality. The concept of climate justice is highly relevant in addressing climate change and environmental protection as it refers to the historically unequal responsibility that countries and communities have in terms of the climate crisis. Advocating for climate justice means putting equity and human rights at the core of climate action and decision-making. In addition, it means holding accountable the countries, industries, businesses and people that are emitting large amounts of greenhouse emissions and are therefore contributing more to the crisis than those who are greatly affected by it, usually vulnerable countries and communities.

It is evident that vulnerable groups, encompassing women, children, LGBTIQ individuals, people with disabilities, minorities and indigenous peoples, bear the brunt of the impact of climate change. The escalating threats, ranging from rising sea levels to more frequent extreme weather events, disproportionately affect these groups. The prevailing discrimination and exclusion faced by these social groups render them exceptionally

susceptible to the adverse impacts of climate change. In addition, we see that climate solutions and policies are being influenced by powerful groups within our current political and economic governance such as huge transnational companies that are responsible for most of the CO₂ emissions. We also see policies and solutions that are blind to the impact they have on these marginalized social groups. Older white males tend to be overrepresented in European climate change policy-making groups.

The Linkages between Gender and Climate Change

A striking aspect underscored by research is the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on women compared to their male counterparts. This gender-unequal situation stems from deeply ingrained patriarchal structures entrenched in societies, intersecting with neo-colonial, neo-liberal and racist structures globally. Consequently, these socially constructed barriers contribute to gendered, vulnerable circumstances, reinforcing the urgency for a policy-driven approach to address these interconnected challenges.

In essence, gender serves as a conceptual framework delineating the roles, behaviours and opportunities deemed appropriate for individuals identified as 'women' and 'men' or another gender. The linkage between gender and climate change has fairly recently gained recognition as a distinct field of study. In 1988, a seminal work entitled "Women and Environment in the Third World: Alliance for the Future" by Irene Dankelman and Joan Davidson marked one of the earliest contributions to this discourse. Since then, feminist



Climate Strike Glasgow on 5 November 2021

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scholars and activists worldwide have endeavoured to illuminate the gender dimensions within urgent environmental challenges.

Gendered roles - a set of socially proscribed behaviours and attitudes deemed appropriate or desirable for individuals based on their birth sex - are key factors in the context of climate justice, including access to resources and capital and meeting societal expectations. Gendered behavioural patterns emerge as a reflection of cultural norms and values within a society, thus giving rise to societies often perceived as dominated by patriarchal structures. However, there also exist examples of matriarchal societies where women hold central roles. The concept of gender serves to illuminate that gender inequality is not a fixed reality but rather a dynamic issue capable of transformation.

Traditional gender expectations significantly influence access to vital resources, with women often facing constraints due to their marginalised societal position. Conversely, men tend to benefit from societal privileges that facilitate relatively unhindered access to resources. Climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities, disproportionately impacting women and girls who face heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV) during crises, such as sexual assaults and human trafficking. As climate change is not "gender-neutral", it is imperative to address gender-specific impacts within a comprehensive policy framework to

address the root causes of gender disparities.

Queer-Feminist Terminology

It is important to note that the climate crisis is not a binary scenario because individuals across genders who are affected embody a diverse spectrum of qualities, privileges, and attributes. The framing of genders as stark opposites oversimplifies the intricate realities of human existence. It is crucial to acknowledge the distinction between 'gender' and 'sex'. Gender has emerged as a concept distinct from biological sex, which pertains to the physiological differences between males and females (e.g. gonads, sexual organs, chromosomes, hormones). (see the Council of Europe's information on "Sex and Gender").

Gender is a layered construct shaped by social, psychological, and cultural influences, evolving through processes of socialisation. This encompasses the norms, behaviours, and roles associated with various gender identities, including women, men, girls, boys and gender non-conforming individuals, as well as the relational dynamics between them.

Across different societies and cultures, perceptions of what constitutes 'masculine' or 'feminine' may vary. Societies establish norms and expectations around gender, transmitted through familial, educational, and media contexts, thereby shaping individual behaviours and societal structures. Notably, gender serves as both an analytical framework for understanding identity formation and a political concept addressing power dynamics within societies. As a socially constructed phenomenon, gender exhibits variability across cultures and may undergo evolution over time.

In our approach to gender equality, we recognise the importance of acknowledging more than two genders. This entails including other gender identities such as transgender individuals, queer persons, and those identifying as non-binary within our analysis and comparison framework. While various definitions exist, we adhere to the one adopted by the European Union, encompassing LGBTIQ identities. Additionally, terms such as gender-nonconforming individuals and gender-marginalised groups are employed, emphasising the need to move beyond a binary understanding of gender. However, for the sake of clarity and due to limitations in available research, this paper primarily references gender in terms of men and women. It's worth noting that the majority of research does not delve into additional analysis regarding gender-marginalised groups, thus restricting the scope of our



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analysis to women and girls for practicality and readability purposes.

Intersectional Feminist Perspective

Combining an intersectional approach with a gender lens is essential, as each man or woman is uniquely influenced by a set of privileges and disadvantages pertaining to this individual only. An older woman being racialized in a big town might have little in common with a young white woman in a village. An intersectional approach helps people to steer clear of oversimplified classifications of men and women.

Intersectionality, a cornerstone concept within both feminist and environmental spheres, was first introduced by American scholar, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989. This concept recognises individuals as multifaceted beings with diverse experiences, resisting the tendency to categorise them in narrow terms. Fundamentally, intersectionality acknowledges the impossibility of confining individuals to singular categories, emphasising the need to comprehend human complexity beyond a single form of identity, such as gender. Instead, it underscores the interplay of various types of identity, including ethnicity/racialization, gender, class, age, (dis)ability, and geographic location, which are intertwined with societal power structures and inequalities.

Feminist Perspectives on Climate Justice

Mary Robinson, former U.N. climate envoy, once stated: "*Climate change is a man-made problem and must have a feminist solution*". Gender considerations must not be an adjunct but rather a fundamental element in shaping ideas for a just transition through a feminist lens. Consequently, such concepts should be informed by feminist principles, alongside de-colonial and anti-racist methodologies.

Feminist analysis has scrutinised the dominance of

Western knowledge paradigms, highlighting the subjugation and exploitation of indigenous knowledge systems. Particularly within ecofeminist discourse, notably prevalent in Latin America, emphasis is placed on the nexus between violence against nature, territories, and human bodies. Feminist critique has consistently pointed out that the commodification of productivity, efficiency, and competition tends to sideline the imperative of nurturing both human and environmental well-being. Western political-economic governance is geared to enhance a relentless pursuit of productivity, measured by GDP growth, that results in an enduring crisis of social reproduction. Notably, prevailing green economic discourses often prioritise technological solutions, thereby obfuscating the underlying economic and ecological structures. This perspective narrowly focuses on technological advancements' capacity to remediate, enhance, or streamline processes while at the same time failing to address the root causes of contemporary challenges.

Feminist advocates have consistently opposed the practice of patenting living organisms and the commodification of women's bodies, prioritising scrutiny of the social ramifications and associated costs. Their emphasis lies in reclaiming communal resources and fostering collective ownership. Central to ecofeminist thinking is the recognition of climate change, gender disparity, and societal inequity as interrelated challenges, all stemming from the prevailing dominance of patriarchal structures within society. Part of this critique is the development of (eco-) feminist alternatives that aim to put reproduction or care at the centre of the economy, based on a socio-economic model that is not aiming for as much economic growth as possible but balanced sustainable growth in which people live within planetary means. An example of such alternative models and practices is the development of the Buen Vivir concept, stemming from indigenous communities in Latin and Central America. Another is the role of local/regional cooperatives that focus on basic needs.

Gendered Vulnerabilities

The disproportionate impact of climate change on women in comparison to men is intricately linked to various societal, cultural, and economic factors. The fundamental query, Why does climate change impact women differently than men? has been scrutinised by experts in the climate field, with a resounding response pointing to gender inequality. The United Nations underscores that gender inequality, coupled with the climate crisis, constitutes one of the most formidable threats to women's livelihoods, health, safety, and security globally. Consequently, it is imperative to acknowledge that climate change acts as a catalyst, reinforcing existing gender disparities, and rendering it inherently non-gender neutral.

Globally, women bear the responsibility of sustaining households by ensuring access to food, water, and fuel. Despite agriculture being a pivotal sector for women's employment in the Global South, women still have limited access to land and other natural resources, which leads to their dependence on their husbands' decisions. The pressure on young girls to leave school prematurely to take up household duties further exemplifies this inequality. Moreover, women's and girls' health is adversely impacted by climate change, as they grapple with limited resources to access essential services and healthcare.

During climate disasters, the vulnerability of women intensifies and the proliferation of diseases occurs, with childbirth becoming more perilous, with a greater risk of fatality for both the mother and the child. Women also play a central role as primary caretakers of families, ensuring the safety of their children during crises. As food becomes scarce due to insufficient rainfall, women often sacrifice their own nutrition to feed their families. Women also bear the brunt of water scarcity, facing the perils of long journeys in search of clean water during droughts. This exposes them to heightened risks such as sexual assault, harassment, and human trafficking. The domestic sphere is not exempt from dangers, with GBV rates, including domestic violence, surging during climate disasters. Furthermore, the aftermath of climate-related disasters often forces women into precarious situations. Fleeing from flooded homes, they seek shelter in informal urban settlements, commonly referred to as urban slums, living in uncertain and vulnerable conditions. Women's lack of access to social, economic, and educational capital makes them particularly vulnerable to the existential threat posed by climate change.

Recent research suggests a shift in perspective concerning gender-related vulnerabilities in the context of the climate crisis. Rather than solely examining the direct effects of climate on gendered vulnerabilities, emphasis should be placed on comprehending the dynamic

Climate Strike and March in Pittsburgh on 24 September 2021
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nature of these vulnerabilities. Women are not vulnerable because they are women, but because of socially constructed patriarchal power structures that they often live within. These power structures result in restricted access to essential resources and public services, limited educational opportunities, and constraints on owning land. Women typically possess fewer businesses, encounter challenges in formal employment, and encounter barriers in accessing credit and financial resources compared to men. A significant portion of unpaid care work falls upon women within families. These responsibilities encompass tasks such as procuring water and food, duties that become increasingly burdensome in climate-vulnerable areas where resources are scarce. The existing gendered division of labour further exacerbates the challenges faced by women.

Essentially, individuals' adaptive capacity is intricately linked to factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, financial resources, power dynamics and access to and control over essential resources, notably land. The extent of gender inequality in these factors directly correlates with the challenges women face in implementing effective adaptation strategies. Addressing and mitigating these disparities is imperative for the development of robust policy frameworks aimed at enhancing women's resilience in the face of climate-induced challenges.

Women as Active Agents in the Context of Climate Change

To enhance the efficacy of strategies addressing climate change, it is imperative to leverage the expertise of women across various domains. Women play pivotal roles in agriculture, biodiversity conservation, household management, income generation and in political spheres. Despite the prevailing discourse highlighting the vulnerability of women in the Global South to the impacts of climate change, it is crucial to recognise their proactive engagement in developing adaptation strategies. Women, often faced with unequal access to resources and bearing a disproportionate burden of climate change risks, exhibit remarkable resilience. They not only confront challenges but emerge as agents of change. While acknowledging the heightened vulnerability of women, it is equally important to underscore their role as key contributors to sustainable solutions. Efforts towards gender equality and the inclusion of women in decision-making processes are paramount in steering the trajectory towards a sustainable future. The intersectionality lens encourages a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics.

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Scholars have critiqued the depiction of women in the climate discourse as merely “vulnerable”. Consequently, the focus has shifted towards recognising the agency, skills, and voices of women who defy the portrayal of inherent victimhood. Despite the myriad challenges women encounter in diverse societal contexts, they actively seek alternative avenues for self-empowerment. Organising at different levels from local grassroots to international cooperation, women resist oppressive systems and establish networks that afford them collective power to pursue common objectives. This collective action not only provides a platform for resistance but also cultivates opportunities for resilient livelihoods. In adopting a policy-oriented tone, it is imperative to highlight the agency of women in the face of climate change challenges.

A demonstrable example of women’s agency can be seen in their political participation, as research reveals that countries with more women in parliament often implement stringent climate change policies. Therefore, the increased presence of women in government correlates with stronger climate policies. Furthermore, women and girls around the world have been at the forefront of climate activism and have used a variety of methods to protect, restore and regenerate the environment. This can be seen in the Pallur Dalit Women’s Collective which began in 2016 when 40 landless Dalit women reclaimed over seven acres of illegally occupied land in their community to promote food sovereignty through collective farming. Girl-led and youth-led groups, networks, and collectives are emerging as influential voices, actively advocating for the integration of gender equality concerns into discussions on climate change. Some of these vital voices include Ainura Sagyn, Autumn Peltier, Disha Ravi, Elizabeth Wathuti, Greta Thunberg, Hilda Flavia Nakabuye, Howey Ou, Isra Hirsi, Luisa Neubauer, Vanessa Nakate and Xiye Bastida.

Policy Recommendations

A logical policy recommendation is to promote the inclusion of a gender perspective that is intersectional with specific gendered targets in policies. Climate change policies should not be gender blind, nor be blind to the impact and interrelationships with racism or neo-colonialism. However, feminists have argued that mainstreaming gender into climate policies is not enough to achieve climate justice. The discourse surrounding climate change and gender necessitates a shift towards addressing underlying issues conducive to effecting transformative gender change.

European countries and the EU should take responsibility for current macroeconomic policies that contribute hugely to pollution such as CO₂ emissions and they should transform these policies. This entails supporting macroeconomic strategies aimed at transitioning towards a “well-being” or “caring economy.” Such an economy would also necessitate holding companies accountable for upholding human rights and environmental protection standards, while also ensuring that extractive industries are held liable for any adverse impacts they may cause.

Gender equality interventions must address the structural barriers embedded in norms, laws and policies that contribute to inequality and injustice. Women, girls and gender minorities, particularly those who experience intersecting inequalities based on class, race, ethnicity, caste, and age, need to be promoted to engage fully and equitably in land use decisions, climate management and policy development at national and international levels. To enhance the capacities of women and their communities to advocate for their rights and interests, feminist leaders should come together across movements to make sure that excluded voices are heard.



Spotlight on Women's Collective Farming

The Women's Action in Development (NAWAD), an organisation established in Uganda in 2009, is dedicated to empowering women and girls while advocating for social justice, economic stability, and sustainable environmental management. The organisation emphasises collaborative empowerment, stressing the importance of cooperation with men to strengthen families and communities and unlock the full potential of all Ugandans. Notably, NAWAD actively engages in agriculture, advocating for collective farming to address land-related challenges. By encouraging women to combine resources for joint land purchases, NAWAD highlights the enhanced protection that comes from collective ownership, making external interventions, particularly from husbands, more difficult. Harvesting is also approached as a collective effort, allowing women to reap greater benefits from their combined hard work throughout the year. In this way, NAWAD offers women the opportunity to leverage their diverse skills, knowledge, and experiences collectively, thus promoting the development of community resilience.



Spotlight on Fridays For Future

Individual examples, particularly notable among female climate activists, further highlight the impactful role of young women in climate action. One prominent illustration is the global climate strike movement, Fridays for Future, which commenced in August 2018. While inclusive of diverse participants, the movement was sparked by Greta Thunberg, a Swedish girl who was 15 at the time. Noteworthy leaders in various countries, such as Luisa Neubauer in Germany, Disha Ravi in India, and Hilda Flavia Nakabuye in Uganda, exemplify young women in pivotal roles, significantly contributing to the movement's national impact. Fridays for Future activists wield moral influence on policymakers, urging them to prioritise scientific insights and implement robust measures to combat global warming. Their advocacy specifically calls for policies aligned with the Paris Agreement, aiming for a pathway well below 2°C. A significant milestone occurred during the Global Week for Future in September 2023, with an estimated four million participants, marking one of the largest climate strikes in recorded history.



Climate Strike Glasgow on 5 November 2021
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Spotlight on Female Indigenous Activism

Within the sphere of climate activism, a notable subset includes activists from indigenous communities. Despite constituting only 5% of the global population, indigenous communities play a crucial role in safeguarding 80% of the world's biodiversity, rendering them indispensable actors in climate protection strategies. Taily Terena from Brazil stands out as a significant female indigenous activist, advocating for indigenous women's rights and environmental causes. As a member of the "Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas" (Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas), she has delivered powerful speeches at the United Nations Framework Convention, highlighting the intersection of indigenous rights and environmental stewardship.



Climate Strike Glasgow on 5 November 2021

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Disclaimer: This project is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the writers and participants and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union of European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Glossary

- **Allies:** People who are (typically) heterosexual and/or cisgender and support the LGBTIQ community.
- **Change Agent:** An individual or a group of individuals who take initiative and orchestrate social changes in an organised manner.
- **Cisgender:** People who identify with the gender assigned at birth.
- **Climate Justice:** Relates to concerns about the inequitable outcomes for different people and places associated with vulnerability to climate impacts and the fairness of policy and practice responses to address climate change and its consequences.
- **Climate Vulnerability:** The degree to which natural, built, and human systems are at risk of exposure to climate change impacts.
- **Decolonialism:** A lens and process that grapples with deconstructing imperial colonisation, whiteness, inclusion and exclusion power dynamics and Eurocentrism.
- **Energy Justice:** Involves ensuring equitable access to clean, affordable energy resources and addressing social, economic, and environmental impacts associated with energy production and consumption. It seeks to mitigate disparities in energy access, affordability, and environmental burdens, with particular attention to marginalized communities disproportionately affected by energy-related issues.
- **Energy Poverty:** An expression used to describe a situation where a household is unable to afford the most basic levels of energy for adequate heating, cooking, lighting and use of appliances in the home.
- **European Green Deal:** A set of policies proposed by the European Commission to make the EU economy sustainable and climate-neutral by 2050. It aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote environmental sustainability, and invest in renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, and biodiversity conservation.
- **Feminist Just Transition:** An approach to transitioning to a sustainable economy that prioritises the needs and rights of women and marginalised groups, aiming to address social, economic, and environmental injustices inherent in the process.
- **Feminisation:** Refers to the process or trend whereby certain occupations, industries, or social roles become increasingly dominated by women. It can have various social, economic, and cultural implications, including changes in power dynamics, labour market trends, and societal perceptions of gender roles.
- **Gender:** Refers to roles, behaviours, attributes and opportunities that society considers appropriate for 'women' and 'men'. Genders are socially constructed, learnt through socialisation processes and vary across cultures/societies and change over time. Gender is a spectrum that can include identities other than traditional binary ones.
- **Gender Blindness:** Failure to recognise that the roles and responsibilities of women/girls and men/boys are ascribed to, or imposed upon, them in specific social, cultural, economic, and political contexts.
- **Gender Mainstreaming:** Integrating a gender equality perspective into all stages of policy processes, ensuring that both women's and men's concerns and experiences are considered in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes across all societal spheres. Its ultimate aim is to achieve gender equality by ensuring that women and men benefit equally and that inequality is not perpetuated.
- **Gender Neutral:** Policy, programme or situation that has no differential positive or negative impact in terms of gender relations or equality between women and men.
- **Gender-Neutral Language:** A broadly encompassing term for language practices aimed at avoiding bias, discrimination, or demeaning implications based on gender or sex. Its purpose is to avoid the choice of words that might imply one gender as the standard or norm.
- **Gender-Minority:** Refers to minority gender identities outside of the traditional gender binary, which includes transgender women, transgender men, and non-binary people, among many other marginalised gender identities.
- **Gender Roles:** A set of socially proscribed behaviours and attitudes deemed appropriate or desirable for individuals based on their sex.
- **Gender-Sensitive:** The ability to acknowledge and highlight existing gender differences, issues and inequalities, and consider them in the design and implementation of strategies and programmes.
- **Grassroots Collectives:** A grassroots movement that leverages the residents of a particular location or community as the foundation for a political or economic initiative. These movements and organisations employ collective action at the local level to enact change that can resonate regionally, nationally, or even globally.
- **Housing Insecurity:** An umbrella term that encompasses several dimensions of housing problems people may experience, including affordability, safety, quality, instability, and loss of housing.
- **Heteronormativity:** Denoting or relating to a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the norm or preferred sexual orientation.
- **Intersectionality:** A tool for understanding how various personal characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, sexual orientation and gender identity intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination. It acknowledges that individuals possess multiple, layered identities shaped by social relations and power structures. Examining these intersections reveals the complexities of discrimination and disadvantage resulting from the combination of identities.
- **LGBTIQ:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Intersexual, Queer
- **Neo-Colonialism:** The economic and political policies by which a great power indirectly maintains or extends its influence over other areas or people.
- **Neoliberal:** A political ideology that favours policies that promote free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending.
- **Non-Binary:** Refers to individuals who do not exclusively identify as male or female. Instead, they may identify as a combination of both genders, neither gender or as a different gender entirely. Non-binary individuals may use various terms to describe their gender identity, such as genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, or bigender. This identity challenges the traditional binary understanding of gender as strictly male or female, acknowledging the diversity and complexity of gender identities.
- **Paris Agreement:** An international treaty under the UNFCCC aimed at limiting global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius and striving for 1.5 degrees Celsius. It outlines commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, enhance climate resilience, and provide financial support to developing countries.
- **Queer:** Denoting or relating to a sexual and gender identity that does not correspond to established heterosexual and cis-binary norms.
- **Safe Spaces:** A place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.
- **Sex:** Refers to the biological characteristics which define humans as female or male. These sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive as there

are intersex individuals who possess both, but in the majority of cases, these characteristics differentiate humans as males and females.

- **Shared Mobility:** Broadly defined as transportation services and resources that are shared among users, either concurrently or one after another.
- **Time Poverty:** The disproportionately large amount of time that women spend in unpaid work, which constrains their ability to engage in other spheres and activities.
- **Transgender:** People whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms such as transgender, transsexual, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-variant, crossdresser, genderless, agender, non-gender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois.
- **Unpaid Labour:** Refers to work that individuals perform without receiving monetary compensation. This can include domestic chores, caregiving responsibilities, and other tasks (that are mostly carried out by women) that contribute to society but are not formally recognised or remunerated in the traditional sense.
- **Vulnerability:** The conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards.

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About The Project

'Gender and Climate Justice: Knowledge for Empowerment' with the acronym 'COPGendered' is an EU-funded project under the Erasmus+ programme that commenced in December 2022 and will run for three years. The project is led by WIDE+ and a transnational consortium of seven leading partners, including Gender CC, WIDE Austria, GADIP, KULU Women and Development, Mundubat, and CSCD. The primary aim is to equip learners with tools, knowledge, and methodologies to understand and address the critical connections between gender inequality and the climate crisis.

This briefing paper is part of a series of papers that delve into specific themes on the nexus of gender and climate justice. This includes the following briefing papers:

- Gender and Climate Justice
- Climate Justice, Gender and Energy
- Climate Justice, Gender and Transport
- Gender and Climate-Induced Migration
- Climate Justice, Gender and Extractivism

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