



Role of Women in Local Climate Governance and Decision Making

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Abstract: Climate change governance increasingly emphasizes local-level decision making, where communities directly experience climate risks and implement adaptation strategies. Within this context, the role of women has gained growing attention due to their close interaction with natural resources, household management responsibilities, and community leadership roles. This paper examines the role of women in local climate governance and decision-making processes using secondary data drawn from international reports, national policy documents, academic literature, and institutional datasets. The study highlights how women's participation contributes to more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable climate actions at the grassroots level. Evidence from global and Indian contexts indicates that women's involvement enhances community resilience, improves resource management, and strengthens climate adaptation outcomes. However, structural barriers such as socio-cultural norms, limited access to decision-making platforms, and inadequate institutional support continue to restrict women's effective participation. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for gender-responsive policies, capacity-building initiatives, and inclusive governance frameworks to strengthen women's role in local climate governance.

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Introduction

Climate change is widely recognized as one of the most significant global challenges of the contemporary era, affecting ecological systems, economic stability, and human well-being across regions. While climate change is a global phenomenon, its impacts are experienced most directly at the local level through rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, water scarcity, extreme weather events, and livelihood insecurity (IPCC, 2022). As a result, climate governance has increasingly emphasized decentralized and participatory approaches that empower local institutions and communities to design and implement mitigation and adaptation strategies responsive to local realities (Agrawal, 2008). This shift has brought renewed attention to local climate governance, defined as the processes and institutions through which local governments, community organizations, and stakeholders engage in climate-related decision making and action.

Within this localized governance framework, gender has emerged as a critical dimension of climate policy and practice. A growing body of literature highlights that climate change impacts are not gender-neutral; instead, they interact with existing social, economic, and cultural inequalities, often

placing women at greater risk (Dankelman, 2010). Women, particularly in developing countries, are more dependent on climate-sensitive resources such as agriculture, water, and forests for household sustenance and livelihoods. At the same time, they play a central role in managing these resources, giving them valuable experiential knowledge that can contribute meaningfully to climate adaptation and resilience strategies (Agarwal, 2010).

Despite their critical role, women have historically been underrepresented in formal decision-making structures related to environmental and climate governance. Studies indicate that women's voices are often marginalized in local institutions due to patriarchal norms, limited access to education and resources, and institutional barriers that restrict meaningful participation (Rao et al., 2017). This exclusion not only undermines gender equity but also weakens the effectiveness of climate governance, as decision-making processes fail to incorporate diverse perspectives and locally grounded knowledge. Conversely, empirical evidence suggests that women's participation in governance leads to improved environmental outcomes, more equitable resource distribution, and enhanced community resilience (UN Women, 2021).

Recognizing these linkages, international policy frameworks have increasingly emphasized gender-responsive climate governance. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly acknowledge the importance of women's participation and leadership in climate action. In particular, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) highlight the need for inclusive decision-making processes that integrate gender considerations into climate policies and local governance mechanisms (United Nations, 2015).

In India, local governance institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), urban local bodies, self-help groups, and community-based organizations play a pivotal role in climate-related planning and implementation. Constitutional provisions under the 73rd and 74th Amendments have significantly increased women's political representation at the local level through reservation policies. However, several scholars argue that numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive participation or influence in policy decisions, particularly in technically complex areas such as climate governance (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Narayanan, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the role of women in local climate governance and decision making using secondary data from global and Indian sources. The paper aims to analyze women's contributions, assess the outcomes of their participation, identify persistent barriers, and draw policy-relevant insights for strengthening gender-inclusive climate governance at the local level.

Literature Review

The relationship between gender and climate change has been widely examined in academic and policy-oriented literature over the past two decades. Early studies on climate governance largely adopted a gender-neutral approach, focusing primarily on technical, economic, and institutional dimensions of climate mitigation and adaptation (Agrawal, 2008). However, feminist scholars and development researchers have consistently argued that such approaches overlook the differentiated impacts of climate change on men and women, as well as the unequal access to resources and decision-making power that shape climate vulnerability and resilience (Dankelman, 2010).

A significant strand of literature emphasizes that women are disproportionately affected by climate change due to their socially constructed roles and responsibilities. According to Agarwal (2010), women in rural and semi-urban contexts are often responsible for securing water, fuel, and food for households, making them more vulnerable to climate-induced resource scarcity. Similarly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) notes that climate risks interact with existing gender inequalities, intensifying women's exposure to poverty, health risks, and livelihood insecurity. These studies collectively establish that gender is a critical variable in understanding climate impacts and responses.

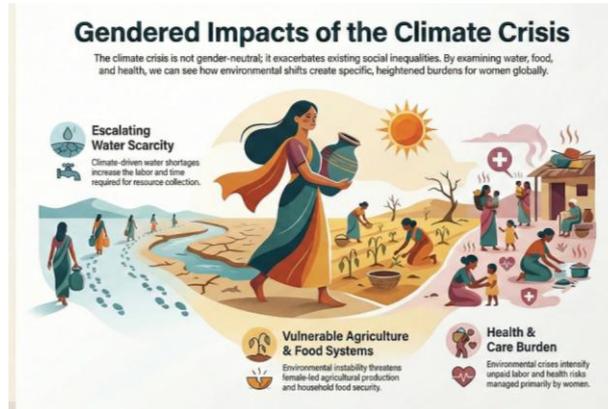


Figure 1: A simple infographic showing ‘Gendered Impacts of Climate Change’

Source: Curated by the author with the use of NotebookLM

Beyond vulnerability, another body of literature highlights women’s adaptive capacities and knowledge systems. Scholars argue that women possess context-specific ecological knowledge derived from their daily interaction with natural resources, which can enhance climate adaptation strategies when incorporated into decision-making processes (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996). Community-based studies from Asia and Africa demonstrate that women-led initiatives in water conservation, agroecology, and disaster preparedness often result in more sustainable and inclusive outcomes (UN Women, 2021). These findings challenge the portrayal of women solely as victims of climate change and instead position them as active agents of change.

The governance dimension of climate change has further strengthened arguments for women’s inclusion. Research on participatory governance suggests that diverse representation improves decision quality, accountability, and legitimacy (Ostrom, 2010). In the context of environmental governance, Agarwal (2001) found that women’s presence in local forest management committees led to better rule compliance and improved conservation outcomes. Similar conclusions are drawn by Rao et al. (2017), who argue that women’s participation enhances transparency and equity in local climate-related institutions. However, these benefits are contingent upon meaningful participation rather than symbolic inclusion.



Figure 2: A conceptual diagram: Women’s Participation → Inclusive Governance → Improved Climate Outcomes

Source: Curated by the author with the use of NotebookLM

Despite growing recognition of the importance of gender-inclusive governance, several studies highlight persistent barriers to women’s effective participation. Structural constraints such as patriarchal norms, time poverty, limited access to education, and lack of financial resources continue to restrict

women's influence in local decision-making forums (Kabeer, 1999; Rao et al., 2017). Institutional challenges, including male-dominated leadership structures and technocratic climate planning processes, further marginalize women's voices. As a result, women's participation often remains limited to attendance rather than active decision-making or leadership roles.

In recent years, policy-oriented literature has increasingly focused on gender-responsive climate governance. International frameworks such as the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan and the Paris Agreement emphasize the integration of gender considerations into climate policies at all levels. According to UN Women (2021), local climate initiatives that explicitly address gender equality are more likely to achieve long-term sustainability and social acceptance. However, scholars caution that policy commitments frequently lack effective implementation mechanisms and monitoring indicators, particularly at the local level (Alston, 2014).

The Indian literature on gender and local governance provides valuable insights into women's participation in decentralized institutions. Studies examining Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment reveal a substantial increase in women's numerical representation in local governance (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Empirical evidence suggests that women leaders prioritize issues such as water supply, sanitation, health, and environmental management, areas closely linked to climate adaptation. Nevertheless, researchers such as Narayanan (2019) argue that women's influence in climate-specific decision making remains constrained due to limited technical capacity, inadequate training, and dependence on male intermediaries.

Overall, the literature underscores a growing consensus that women's participation in local climate governance is both a normative and instrumental necessity. While global and Indian studies highlight the potential benefits of gender-inclusive decision making, they also reveal persistent gaps between policy intent and practice. This indicates the need for further analysis focusing on how women's participation can be strengthened, institutional barriers reduced, and governance frameworks made more responsive to gendered realities, an objective that this study seeks to address.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in theories of participatory governance, gender empowerment, and sustainable development. It seeks to explain the relationship between women's participation in local decision-making institutions and the effectiveness of climate governance outcomes. Existing governance literature suggests that inclusive participation enhances the quality, legitimacy, and sustainability of public decision making (Ostrom, 2010). When applied to climate governance, this perspective emphasizes the importance of integrating diverse social groups, particularly women, whose experiences and knowledge are critical to addressing climate risks at the grassroots level.

At the core of the framework lies women's participation in local governance structures, including Panchayati Raj Institutions, urban local bodies, community-based organizations, and environmental committees. Participation in this context goes beyond numerical representation and includes meaningful involvement in agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring of climate-related initiatives (Agarwal, 2001). Meaningful participation enhances women's agency, defined as their ability to make strategic life choices and influence collective decisions (Kabeer, 1999).

The framework proposes that increased and effective participation of women leads to more inclusive decision-making processes. Women often prioritize issues such as water security, sanitation, health, natural resource conservation, and livelihood sustainability, areas that are directly linked to climate adaptation and resilience. Their involvement contributes to policies that are more responsive to local needs and environmental realities (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Inclusive decision making, in turn, improves governance outcomes by strengthening transparency, accountability, and community ownership of climate initiatives.

These governance improvements are expected to result in enhanced climate outcomes, including better adaptation strategies, improved resource management, and greater community resilience to climate shocks. However, the framework also acknowledges the presence of mediating factors that influence this relationship. Structural barriers such as socio-cultural norms, limited access to technical knowledge, time constraints, and institutional resistance can weaken the impact of women's participation. Conversely, enabling factors such as gender quotas, leadership training, access to information, and supportive policy environments can strengthen the link between participation and outcomes.

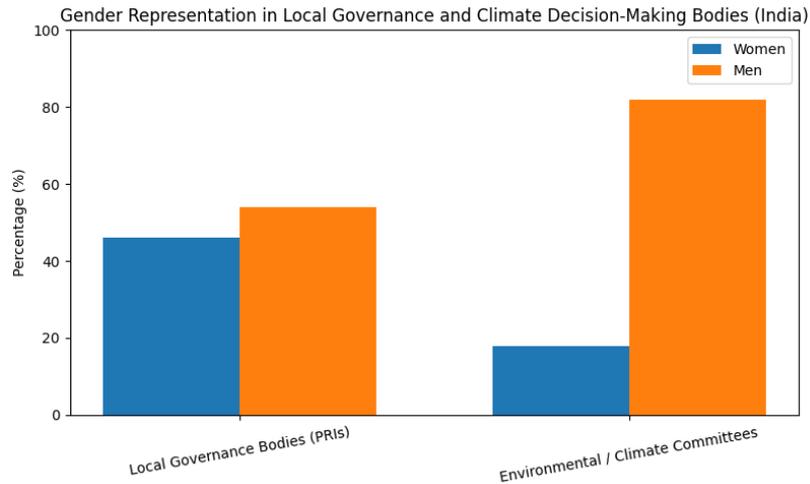


Figure 3: Gender Representation in Local Governance

Source: Curated by the author

Women in Local Climate Governance: Global Evidence

Globally, the inclusion of women in local climate governance has gained increasing recognition as a critical factor for effective and sustainable climate action. International research consistently demonstrates that women’s participation in decision-making processes at the local level contributes to more inclusive governance, improved environmental outcomes, and stronger community resilience. However, evidence also indicates significant regional disparities in the extent and quality of women’s involvement in climate-related institutions (UN Women, 2021).

Studies across developing and developed regions highlight that women’s engagement in local governance enhances climate adaptation strategies by integrating social, environmental, and livelihood concerns. In many contexts, women’s leadership has been associated with improved management of natural resources such as water, forests, and agricultural land, sectors that are particularly vulnerable to climate change (Agarwal, 2010). For instance, community-based adaptation projects in parts of sub-Saharan Africa have shown that women-led water management committees improve access to clean water and reduce conflict over scarce resources during periods of drought (World Bank, 2020). These findings underline the instrumental value of women’s participation beyond normative arguments of gender equality.

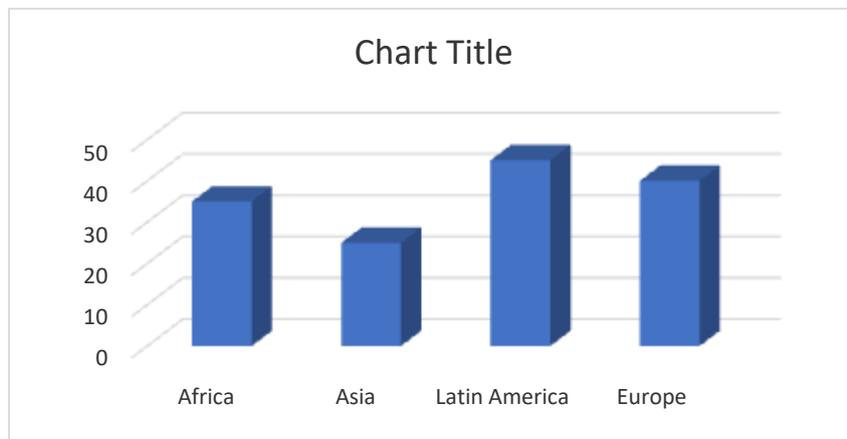


Figure 4: Gender Representation in across regions

Source: Curated by the author

In Latin America, decentralization reforms and gender quota policies have facilitated greater representation of women in local governments. Research indicates that municipalities with higher female representation are more likely to adopt environmental protection measures and invest in climate-resilient infrastructure (Alston, 2014). Similarly, studies from European countries suggest that gender-balanced local councils tend to prioritize long-term sustainability goals, renewable energy adoption, and climate mitigation initiatives (OECD, 2019). These findings support the argument that gender diversity in decision making positively influences policy orientation and outcomes.

In contrast, many Asian and African countries continue to face structural and cultural barriers that limit women's influence in climate governance. Although women are often actively involved in informal climate-related activities such as disaster preparedness, water conservation, and agricultural adaptation, their participation in formal decision-making bodies remains constrained (Rao et al., 2017). This disconnect between informal engagement and formal authority reduces the potential impact of women's contributions on policy outcomes.

The global literature also emphasizes the distinction between descriptive representation (numerical presence) and substantive representation (actual influence). Several studies caution that merely increasing the number of women in governance institutions does not automatically result in gender-sensitive climate policies (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). Women representatives often face institutional resistance, limited access to technical knowledge, and exclusion from key committees where climate decisions are made. As a result, their participation may be symbolic rather than transformative.

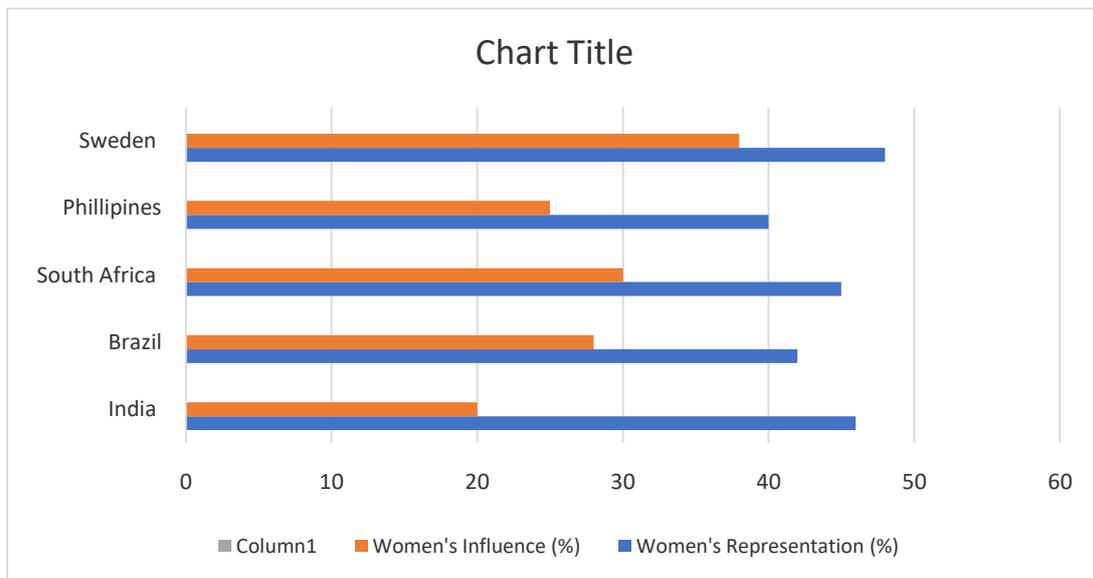


Figure 5: Comparison of women's numerical representation in governance institutions and their substantive influence in climate-related decision-making across selected countries.

Source: Curated by the author

International policy frameworks increasingly acknowledge these challenges. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has adopted a Gender Action Plan to promote women's participation and leadership in climate processes. Similarly, the Paris Agreement recognizes gender equality as a cross-cutting principle in climate action. According to UN Women (2021), countries that integrate gender considerations into local climate planning are more likely to achieve socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable outcomes. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks depends heavily on implementation at the local level, where institutional capacity and political commitment vary widely.

Empirical evidence from disaster risk reduction further highlights the importance of women's leadership. Studies following climate-induced disasters in countries such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Nepal show that women-led community organizations play a crucial role in early warning

dissemination, relief coordination, and post-disaster recovery (UNDP, 2020). These experiences demonstrate that women's local leadership can significantly reduce vulnerability and enhance adaptive capacity when supported by appropriate institutional frameworks.

Overall, the global literature provides strong evidence that women's participation in local climate governance contributes to improved policy design, better resource management, and enhanced resilience. Nevertheless, persistent barriers related to gender norms, institutional structures, and unequal access to resources continue to limit the transformative potential of women's involvement. These findings underscore the need for context-specific strategies that move beyond numerical representation and focus on empowering women as active decision makers in climate governance. The insights from global experiences provide a valuable comparative backdrop for examining the Indian context, which is discussed in the subsequent section.

Women in Local Climate Governance and Decision Making in India

India presents a significant and complex context for examining women's role in local climate governance due to its high climate vulnerability, vast socio-economic diversity, and strong institutional framework for decentralized governance. Climate change in India manifests through increasing frequency of extreme weather events, water stress, agricultural uncertainty, coastal erosion, and urban flooding, with impacts felt most acutely at the local level (IPCC, 2022). Consequently, local governance institutions play a critical role in planning and implementing climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. Within this framework, women's participation in decision making has gained policy attention, though its effectiveness remains uneven.

The constitutional framework for local governance in India, particularly the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, has significantly enhanced women's political representation through mandatory reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies. As a result, women currently constitute approximately 45–50 percent of elected representatives in PRIs, placing India among the countries with the highest proportion of women in local governance globally (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2022). This increased representation has created institutional opportunities for women to influence local development priorities, many of which intersect directly with climate adaptation, such as water management, sanitation, health, and natural resource conservation.

Despite high numerical representation, several studies indicate that women's participation in climate-specific decision making remains limited. Research suggests that women elected representatives are often excluded from technical committees, environmental planning bodies, and climate-related task forces, where key decisions are made (Narayanan, 2019). Climate governance in India is frequently embedded within sectoral departments such as water resources, agriculture, forestry, and disaster management, which tend to be male-dominated and technocratic in nature. As a result, women's voices are often underrepresented in climate planning processes, despite their extensive engagement with climate-sensitive livelihoods.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence highlights that where women do participate meaningfully, their contributions positively influence climate governance outcomes. Studies examining women-led Panchayats have found greater emphasis on water conservation, rainwater harvesting, sanitation infrastructure, and sustainable natural resource use (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). These priorities align closely with local climate adaptation needs, particularly in rural and semi-arid regions. Women leaders are also more likely to consult community members, promote participatory decision making, and prioritize long-term welfare over short-term political gains.

Beyond formal political institutions, women's collectives such as self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives, and community-based organizations play a vital role in local climate governance in India. SHGs have been actively involved in climate-resilient agriculture, afforestation initiatives, water management, and livelihood diversification programs across several states (UN Women, 2021). These informal and semi-formal institutions often serve as critical platforms for women's leadership and climate action, compensating for their limited influence in formal governance structures.

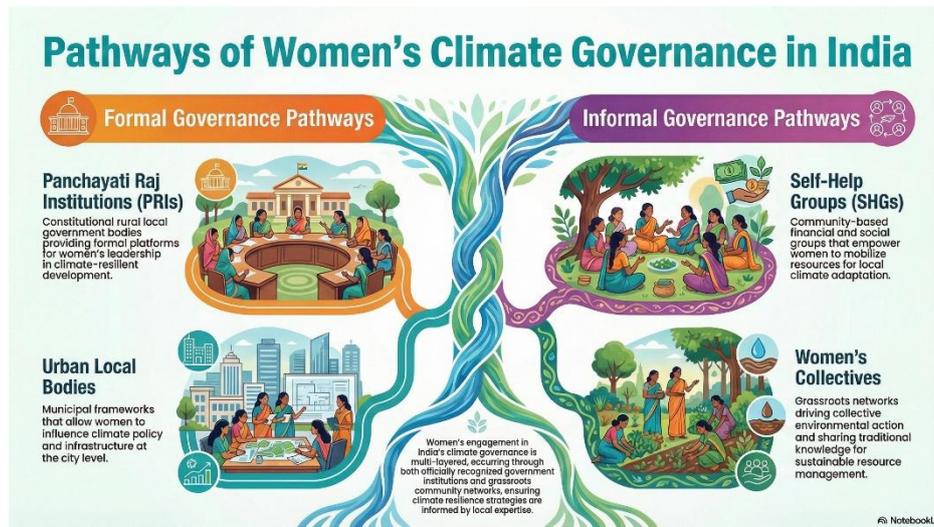


Figure 6: Formal (PRIs, urban local bodies) and informal (SHGs, women's collectives) pathways of women's participation in local climate governance.

Source: Curated by the author with the use of NotebookLM

Despite these contributions, multiple barriers continue to constrain women's effective participation in local climate decision making. Socio-cultural norms rooted in patriarchy often restrict women's mobility, public participation, and leadership roles. Many elected women representatives face "proxy leadership," where male family members exercise decision-making authority on their behalf (Rao et al., 2017). Additionally, limited access to education, technical training, climate data, and financial resources further reduces women's ability to engage effectively with complex climate policies.

Institutional challenges also persist. Climate governance frameworks in India often lack explicit gender mainstreaming mechanisms at the local level. Although national climate policies acknowledge gender concerns, their translation into local planning instruments such as District Climate Action Plans remains weak. Furthermore, the absence of gender-disaggregated data in climate programs makes it difficult to assess women's actual participation and impact.

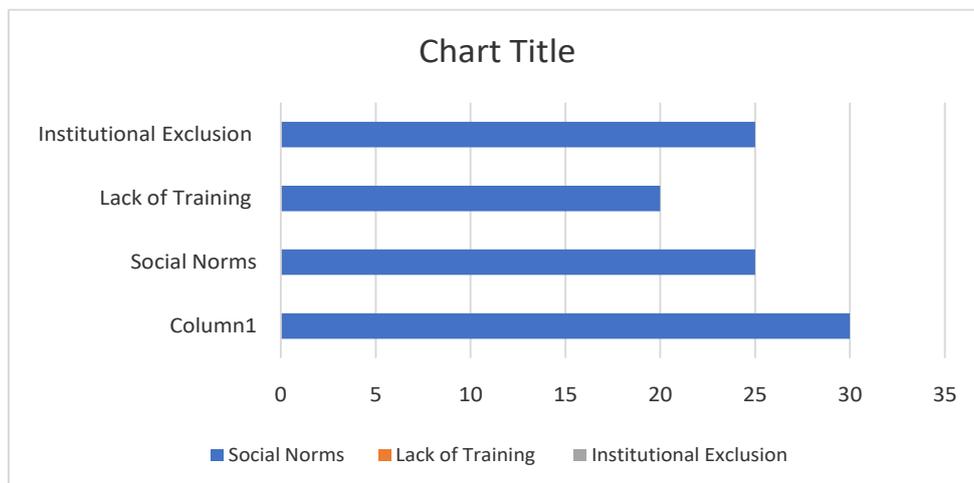


Figure 7: Barriers to women's participation in local climate governance

Source: Curated by the author

Overall, the Indian experience reflects a paradox of high political representation but limited substantive influence in climate governance. While constitutional provisions and community-based institutions provide entry points for women's participation, structural and institutional barriers continue to limit their role in climate-specific decision making. Strengthening women's capacity, ensuring their inclusion in climate committees, and integrating gender perspectives into local climate planning are essential for translating representation into meaningful climate action. The Indian case thus underscores the need for gender-responsive governance frameworks that move beyond symbolic inclusion toward transformative participation.

Key Factors, Challenges, and Enablers of Women's Participation in Local Climate Governance

Women's participation in local climate governance is shaped by a complex interplay of social, institutional, economic, and policy-related factors. While global and Indian evidence demonstrates the potential benefits of women's inclusion in climate decision making, the extent and effectiveness of their participation depend on the presence of enabling conditions and the mitigation of persistent challenges. This section synthesizes key factors influencing women's roles in local climate governance, drawing from secondary literature and policy analyses.

One of the most significant factors affecting women's participation is the socio-cultural context within which local governance institutions operate. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms continue to define gender roles, often limiting women's public engagement and leadership opportunities. In many communities, women's primary responsibilities for household care and unpaid labor create time constraints that restrict their ability to participate actively in governance processes, including climate-related meetings and consultations (Kabeer, 1999). These norms not only affect women's physical presence in decision-making spaces but also influence the credibility and legitimacy accorded to their voices.

Institutional structures and governance processes also play a critical role. Although constitutional provisions in India have ensured women's numerical representation in local bodies, decision-making power often remains concentrated in male-dominated committees and executive positions. Climate governance, in particular, tends to be technocratic, requiring specialized knowledge of environmental planning, data analysis, and policy instruments. Women's limited access to technical training and climate information reduces their ability to engage effectively in such forums (Narayanan, 2019). Moreover, the prevalence of proxy leadership, where male relatives exercise authority on behalf of elected women representatives, further undermines women's substantive participation (Rao et al., 2017).

Economic factors constitute another major challenge. Women often have limited access to financial resources, credit, and land ownership, which constrains their capacity to initiate or influence climate-related projects. In the context of climate governance, control over financial resources is closely linked to decision-making authority, and women's economic marginalization often translates into reduced influence over budget allocations and project implementation (Agarwal, 2010). This economic dependency weakens women's bargaining power within local institutions.

Despite these challenges, several enabling factors have been identified in the literature. Legal and policy interventions such as gender quotas have played a crucial role in increasing women's representation in local governance. Studies indicate that reservation policies not only enhance descriptive representation but can also gradually shift social norms by normalizing women's leadership roles (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). However, quotas are most effective when accompanied by supportive institutional measures that facilitate women's active participation.

Capacity-building initiatives represent a key enabler of meaningful participation. Training programs focused on leadership skills, climate literacy, and governance processes enhance women's confidence and ability to engage in technical discussions related to climate planning. Evidence from women-led community organizations and self-help groups in India suggests that collective action and peer support significantly strengthen women's agency in local decision making (UN Women, 2021). These groups often serve as incubators for leadership, enabling women to transition from informal climate action to formal governance roles.

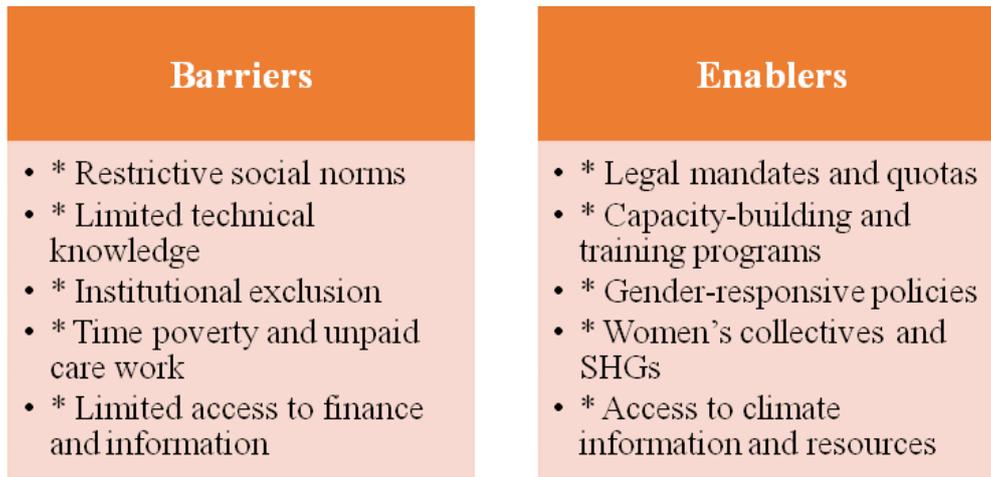


Figure 8: A two-column diagram comparing “Barriers” and “Enablers” of women’s participation in local climate governance.

Source: Curated by the author

Supportive policy frameworks and institutional accountability mechanisms further enhance women’s participation. Gender-responsive budgeting, inclusion of women in climate committees, and systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data are critical for translating policy commitments into practice. International frameworks such as the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan provide guiding principles, but their effectiveness depends on localized implementation and monitoring.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Evidence from global and Indian contexts demonstrates that women’s participation in local climate governance is both a normative requirement and a practical necessity for effective climate action. However, the persistent gap between women’s numerical representation and their actual influence in decision-making highlights the need for targeted and context-sensitive policy interventions.

A key policy implication is that representation alone does not ensure meaningful participation. Although legal provisions in India have increased women’s presence in local governance, climate-specific decision-making bodies remain largely male-dominated. Policymakers must therefore move beyond quota-based approaches and mandate women’s inclusion in environmental committees, climate task forces, and disaster management authorities to ensure their perspectives inform climate planning and implementation.

Capacity building is another critical priority. Limited technical knowledge and restricted access to climate information often constrain women’s engagement in climate governance. Collaborative training initiatives involving government agencies, academic institutions, and civil society organizations can enhance women’s climate literacy, leadership skills, and policy awareness, enabling sustained and informed participation.

Strengthening institutional accountability is equally important. Gender-responsive budgeting, systematic monitoring, and the collection of gender-disaggregated data can improve transparency and support evidence-based policymaking. In addition, recognizing and supporting community-based women’s collectives can strengthen grassroots climate action and bridge the gap between informal participation and formal decision-making.

At the national level, aligning climate policies with gender equality goals, particularly SDG 5 and SDG 13 can enhance coherence and accountability. Finally, long-term efforts to challenge restrictive gender norms through awareness and education are essential for sustaining women’s leadership in climate governance.

In sum, gender-responsive local climate governance requires an integrated policy approach that combines legal mandates, capacity development, institutional reform, and community engagement to achieve inclusive and resilient climate outcomes.

Conclusion

Climate change presents complex challenges that require inclusive and participatory governance, particularly at the local level where its impacts are most directly felt. This paper examined women's role in local climate governance using secondary evidence from global and Indian contexts, highlighting both their potential contributions and the barriers limiting meaningful participation.

The analysis shows that women contribute significantly to climate governance through their close interaction with natural resources, community networks, and household-level adaptation practices. Global studies indicate that women's participation enhances inclusivity and sustainability in climate decision-making. In India, constitutional provisions have improved women's numerical representation in local governance institutions; however, a clear gap persists between representation and substantive influence, especially in formal environmental and climate-related bodies.

Socio-cultural norms, institutional constraints, limited technical capacity, and economic marginalization continue to restrict women's effective participation. At the same time, enabling mechanisms such as legal mandates, capacity-building initiatives, women's collectives, and gender-responsive policies demonstrate strong potential to enhance women's leadership. Importantly, women's inclusion should be viewed not only as an equity concern but as a strategic necessity for improving climate governance and resilience.

In conclusion, strengthening women's role in local climate governance requires moving beyond symbolic participation toward transformative engagement. Gender-responsive governance frameworks, institutional support, and capacity development are essential to address structural inequalities. Empowering women at the local level is therefore critical not only for gender equality but also for achieving effective and inclusive climate action.

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