

Feminist Perspectives on Climate Diplomacy

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This is the critical decade for climate action and all foreign policy interventions will be judged against this global challenge.

It's well established that Australia's reticence to act on climate change is undermining our diplomatic relationships, particular with our near neighbours in the Pacific. As a collective action problem, climate change requires nations to look beyond their own narrowly defined interests and seek collective global solutions. Feminist foreign policy provides a lens through which we can see climate action as a shared priority, a human security issue, and one which is central to Australia's relationships with the region. Additionally as a framework which emphasises the need for policy coherence between domestic and international issues, feminist foreign policy highlights the need for Australia to take domestic action on climate change in order to fulfil our international role.

Critically, the impacts of climate change are gendered, and so the solutions must be informed by rigorous gender analysis. Feminist foreign policy, with its focus on understanding and transforming the systemic drivers of inequality and marginalization, can further our understanding of the historical contributions of nations to climate change and rebalance of the scales towards the most marginalized who face the greatest impacts.

Climate Diplomacy for the Critical Decade

The latest IPCC Sixth Assessment Report on Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation (2022) has recognized this, stating that not only are the impacts of climate change heavily gendered, intersectional solutions that promote just and equitable mitigation and adaptation actions to support sustainable development can lessen climate risk:

Structural vulnerabilities to climate change can be reduced through carefully designed and implemented legal, policy, and process interventions from the local to global that address inequities based on gender, ethnicity, disability, age, location and income (very high confidence).

This includes rights-based approaches that focus on capacity-building, meaningful participation of the most vulnerable groups, and their access to key resources, including financing, to reduce risk and adapt (high confidence).

Evidence shows that climate resilient development processes link scientific, Indigenous, local, practitioner and other forms of knowledge, and are more effective and sustainable because they are locally appropriate and lead to more legitimate, relevant and effective actions (high confidence).

To date, Australian diplomacy has not fulfilled this brief. Instead, Australian foreign policy as expressed through the 2017 White Paper has relegated climate issues as just another risk to the region. Our [national plan](#) takes a technology-driven, neoliberal market solutions approach in which gender is not mentioned once, not to mention other kinds of knowledge and approaches to climate change such as First Nations perspectives.

This paper first provides practical recommendations for short and long term goals for Australia's climate action – including immediate priorities for COP27. It then outlines a case study for climate action under a feminist foreign policy approach, calling for Australia to become a world leader in sexual and reproductive health and rights in climate change and disaster risk reduction.

Short and long term priorities for feminist climate diplomacy

Australia's short-term goal must be to take to a much more ambitious national climate action plan (NDC) and Long-Term Strategies to COP27 in November. The long-term goal must be to reorganise DFAT to enable it to tackle the centrality of climate change as a human security risk, acknowledging that current diplomatic methods might also need to adjust. Australia should prioritise working with our Pacific neighbours on climate diplomacy (see further IWDA recommendations [here](#)).

To this end:

- We welcome the announcement that Australia has appointed a Gender Focal Point to UNFCCC and look forward to meetings with civil society and academics. We would like DFAT to support/endorse a track 2 dialogue that would create a Feminist Climate Club alliance in Canberra and beyond.
- The Gender Focal Point position is also meant to ensure that Australia is adopting a gender-responsive approach in the design and implementation of Australia's climate policy. Australia must lead by example and integrate gender into national climate policy in order to have credibility when integrating gender into Australian development funded climate projects.
- We welcome the pledge made by Australia at COP26 to provide an additional \$500 million of climate finance targeting projects in the Indo-Pacific Region. All Australian climate investments should involve a methodology for ensuring a gender-sensitive approach.
- We urge DFAT to elevate climate diplomacy and resource the climate and gender teams to undertake this work, including climate induced displacement.
- We encourage the Minister to commission a new White Paper on Climate Diplomacy, and make a landmark speech, with the meaningful participation of Pacific diaspora and First Nations peoples to create a genuine moment for dialogue
- We call on DFAT to create a Climate Strategy that brings together policies and approaches across Gender, Women Peace and Security, Indigenous Peoples, Pacific and disaster risk reduction
- We urge the Federal Government to bring back the Department of Climate Change to elevate domestic policy to add legitimacy to our international positions.
- We urge DFAT to support research linking scientific, Indigenous, and other forms of knowledge as priority for robust and diverse evidence-based policymaking on climate change

COP27 gender recommendations

- Australia should work with partners in the region to champion the global effort to recognize and redress loss and damage from climate change, centering the most marginalized peoples and communities in addressing climate impacts, particularly women and girls;
- Commit to ending the sovereign debt crisis to ensure

- fiscal space for climate action and gender equality;
- Cast a critical, intersectional, feminist lens over climate solutions, particularly the emphasis on net zero and nature-based solutions in the climate and biodiversity arenas. For example, technology alone will not solve the climate crisis and Australia must reject false solutions that justify the operation of technologies that are not compatible with ensuring a 1.5 degree future. Australia must commit genuinely to emissions reduction across all sectors and take action to support renewable energy, address deforestation rates across the country but particularly in Queensland and New South Wales and ensure that soil carbon accounting practices are based on rigorous methodology, not wishful thinking.
- Advance a just and equitable energy transition, shifting from a fossil-fuel based economy to a low-carbon and renewable energy system that upholds women's human rights and advances social and environmental justice; and
- Fulfill historical obligations to provide gender-just climate finance that is predictable, adequate, transparent, accountable, accessible and in the form of grants rather than loans.
- Focus Australian diplomatic efforts on building political support for the Gender Action Plan at COP27, in order to promote feminist climate justice at the global level
- Ensure the Australian Health Impact Assessment pays greater attention to gender issues and intersectional impacts

Australia has a real opportunity to lead the world in feminist climate justice. The following case study on the risk to sexual and reproductive rights due to climate impacts highlights this opportunity and identifies key areas for action, beginning with the creation of a strategy.

Case Study: Translating learnings from feminist approaches to disaster preparedness and response to address future climate risks for women and girls using a sexual and reproductive health lens

Due to socially constructed gender roles and responsibilities, climate-related disasters have different impacts on men, women, girls, and boys (Harris Rimmer 2021). As the recent UN Report on Gender, Climate and Security put it: "There is... an urgent need for better analysis and concrete, immediate actions to address the linkages between climate change and conflict from a gender perspective." One of these urgent areas is reproductive health. The 2022 IPCC Sixth Assessment Report on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability states with high confidence in Chapter 18 that a key potential solution for addressing gendered vulnerability to climate change impacts is:

Increased access to reproductive health and family planning services, which contributes to climate change resilience and socio-economic development through

improved health and well-being of women and their children, including increased access to education, gender equity, and economic status.

In 2021, MSI Reproductive Choices issued a warning that more than 14 million women could lose access to contraception as climate change worsens living conditions around the world. This finding was additional to the research from the 26 countries where MSI operates that since 2011 an estimated 11.5 million women have had their access to contraception disrupted due to climate-related displacement (MSI 2021).

This finding was based on World Bank estimates that climate change could internally displace more than 216 million people by 2050 (Clement 2021). It is already established that one in five women and girls report experiencing sexual violence in humanitarian settings (Vu 2014). As the need for sexual and reproductive healthcare becomes more acute, access to high quality care usually falls.

Policy makers may find it hard to “make the leap” when grasping that climate change decreases access to contraception, but the evidence is clear that natural disasters systemically affect women and girls in particular ways. Any type of displacement that threatens an adverse economic impact on a group may have greater adverse impacts for women and girls, as due to socially constructed gender roles and responsibilities, they may have less income, access to information and power in any particular situation. Just as the COVID-19 lockdowns exacerbated intimate partner and family violence, we will need to learn quickly how climate disasters affect men and women, boys and girls. For example, around 12 million more young girls are thought to have been married off as the frequency of natural disasters has increased (Atkinson and Bruce 2015).

This climate and reproductive rights lens is relevant to new understandings of conflict and gender in the Anthropocene. New UN research find that poor harvests, livestock loss, lower earnings and food insecurity put pressure on men’s traditional role as providers, which can lead to intimate partner and family violence. Women may also be forced into insecure settings due to food

scarcity or extreme weather events. As the recent UN report on Gender, Climate and Security put it: ‘There is... an urgent need for better analysis and concrete, immediate actions to address the linkages between climate change and conflict from a gender perspective’ (UNDP, 2020: 3).

The ability to protect human rights in emergencies that will be able to respond to climate impacts fall into the current categories created by Schaaf et al (2020):

- 1) humanitarian principles, codes of conduct, and legal instruments;
- 2) technical, performance, and impact standards;
- 3) efforts to solicit and address the rights and needs of the affected populations, or ‘listening and responding’, and,
- 4) accountability demands made by affected populations themselves.

This is an area of practice in which Australia could potentially become a world leader. Australia should focus on **how to preserve human dignity and agency in some of the choices made to face climate change** (see Tanyag 2020). In particular, Australia could address the issue raised by UN Women in their 2019 review of gender action since the World Humanitarian Summit:

...the humanitarian system as a whole has yet to grasp the centrality of empowering women and girls and enhancing their self-reliance, including through partnerships with local women’s groups and organizations. The gender agenda in humanitarian spaces is often conflated with tackling gender-based violence (GBV), which, while necessary, is not sufficient (UN Women 2019).

The Gender Action Plan agreement at the 25th United Nations Climate Change Conference should increase the capability for gender-responsive climate action including through improved governance that can span current boundaries. In particular, it is time to consider how a climate transition could become a transformative gender moment in understanding the links between gender, climate impacts, and human security.

THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women’s rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach which places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.

Endnotes

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