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Gender, wealth, and wellbeing: promising pathways to a just transition

Workshop Report

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The aim of the workshop

On January 24th 2025, Professor Naila Kabeer (London School of Economics, and Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy) and Dr. Grace Mbungu (Africa Policy Research Institute) collaborated with the Robert Bosch Academy to organize a workshop for 20 academics, policymakers and civil society practitioners in order to explore the gender dimensions of the two major challenges of our time - rising inequality and accelerating climate change - within a unified framework.

In her opening remarks, Professor Kabeer laid out the challenges relating to gender in the face of deregulated markets and rising inequality: a small minority of people own a disproportionate share of the world's wealth and claim a disproportionate share of its earningsⁱ. Women as a group own less of this wealth than men, earn just a third of global income and are generally poorer. These economic inequalities are exacerbated by the intersection of gender with other forms of identity-based inequalities, such as race, caste, ethnicity and sexuality.

Dr. Grace Mbunguⁱⁱ spelt out the challenges relating to gender in the context of climate change. She pointed out that inequalities of various kinds mediate the impact of accelerating climate change. Men and women experience climate change differently based on their geographic, economic and social contexts. By and large, it is the wealthy of the world, mostly based in the Global North, who are responsible for rising levels of carbon emissions, while it is poor, rural women based mainly in the Global South, who bear the brunt of climate change. Understanding how climate change impacts these groups differently is crucial for achieving a gender-just transition.

The workshop aimed to explore the common causes that underlie these different forms of inequalities and injustice, causes that are rooted in an unfair economic system. It also explored the range of solutions being discussed by different constituencies, researchers, policy makers and civil society organisations. One concern that motivated the workshop organizers was the need to disentangle the idea of wealth as the production of socially useful and necessary goods and services from the current view of wealth that equates it with market-oriented measure of growth. In other words, production needs to be guided by ideas about wellbeing rather the drive for profit. The distinction is essential to ensure that poor countries and poor people are not penalized in the transition to a more sustainable economy. This report summarizes the discussion that took place at the workshop.

The broad context

With 2025 well underway, the year marking the [30th anniversary](#) of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, advocates for gender equality must confront a sobering reality: Despite decades of effort on their part, gender disparities remain deeply entrenched across societies. Adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the [Beijing Declaration](#) remains a landmark international commitment to advancing women's rights and gender equality across key areas such as education, healthcare, economic

empowerment and political participation. Alongside it, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also set global targets for gender equality and climate action, but with 2030 only five years away, systemic, structural and financial barriers continue to slow the meaningful progress and full realisation of this vision.

Over the past three decades, governments, civil society organisations and international institutions have implemented a range of policies and initiatives to promote gender equality. Significant milestones include greater access to education for women and girls, [legal reforms addressing gender-based violence](#) and increased [political representation](#) of women in leadership roles. For instance, since 2015, [50 million](#) more girls have enrolled in school, and [155 countries](#) have enacted domestic violence laws, with [140 nations](#) implementing workplace harassment protections. However, progress has been slow and uneven. [One in ten women](#) lives in extreme poverty, and 73.5% of women in wage employment [lack social protection](#) globally. Limited access to healthcare, and persistent underrepresentation in decision-making roles remain major obstacles to achieving full equality. The COVID-19 pandemic [exacerbated](#) these disparities, disproportionately impacting women's employment and security. Between 2019 and 2020, women's employment declined by 4.2%, with [54 million jobs lost worldwide](#). Simultaneously, unpaid care burdens intensified due to school closures and increased healthcare demands, further restricting women's participation and well-being.

Compounding these challenges, the climate crisis has deepened existing gender inequalities, with women, especially in the Global South, bearing the brunt. For example, [women account for 80%](#) of those displaced by climate-related disasters, as they are more likely to rely on climate-sensitive livelihoods such as agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Additionally, resource scarcity disproportionately affects women and girls, who are often responsible for collecting water and fuel. In drought-stricken regions, they must travel longer distances to secure these essential resources, increasing exposure to health risks and violence. Climate-stressed environments also drive a [surge in gender-based violence](#), with reports of child marriage rising in climate-affected areas, as families facing food insecurity resort to marrying off daughters in exchange for resources.

Despite the clear links between gender inequality and climate vulnerability, climate action and gender justice remain largely siloed in policy agendas. This gap persists even as [mounting evidence](#) shows that women's leadership and participation in development and climate solutions drive more effective and sustainable outcomes. The workshop participants highlighted the need for a holistic approach to tackling gender, economic and climate injustices. It emphasised that these issues are interconnected and must be addressed as pillars of a just transition.

Below the surface: the hidden structures of gender inequality

Economic, climate and gender injustices are deeply intertwined and rooted in the underlying structural inequalities that dictate who holds power, who controls resources and whose labour is valued. As Professor Kabeer pointed out in her introduction, women's exclusion from decision-making and job markets has long been justified by their reproductive roles, reinforcing the belief that they are 'naturally' better caregivers but less suited for leadership. These gendered assumptions shape labour markets worldwide and influence climate policies, often sidelining women in crucial discussions on mitigation, adaptation and green transitions.

Dr. Mbungu picked up on this theme to emphasize that climate change amplifies existing inequalities and generates new forms of injustice. Women are expected to 'step up' during a crisis such as a climate disaster or an economic collapse, shouldering care work, rebuilding communities and providing stability.

Yet, when they need support, they are [often excluded](#) from post-disaster recovery efforts and denied resources, training and economic opportunities. These disparities are even more pronounced in the Global South, where systemic barriers already limit women's financial security. [For instance](#), after the 2010 floods in Pakistan, many women faced restricted access to humanitarian aid due to financial constraints, social norms limiting their movement and the lack of national identification cards (NICs), a prerequisite for official relief.

Workshop participants agreed that technical climate solutions alone would not fix these injustices. One of them offered an example to demonstrate that expanding renewable energy access did not necessarily lead to gender equality. When Indigenous communities in Mexico adopted wind farms, men controlled the economic benefits while women faced harassment and exclusion from decision-making. These outcomes were not incidental; they stemmed from a long history of colonial oppression, capitalist exploitation and patriarchal inequalities.

The key takeaway from this discussion was the systemic nature of gender norms: they do not only influence personal choices, they shape policies, economic structures and access to climate resources. Consequently, addressing gender inequality requires more than token inclusion, it demands a radical restructuring of economic and financial priorities, political representation, and climate justice strategies. Women must be central to the conversations on economic and climate solutions. A just transition cannot be built on the same foundations that created their exclusion in the first place.

From inequality to opportunity: why gender equality can drive climate resilience and wealth creation

The fight for climate resilience and wealth creation is incomplete without gender equality. Women are not just victims of climate change, they are innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders capable of driving transformative solutionsⁱⁱⁱ. Yet, they remain excluded from shaping the policies and industries that define their collective future. [Studies](#) show that when women control financial resources, they reinvest in families and communities, strengthening long-term stability and sustainability. In India, for example, [self-help groups](#) led by women have created sustainable enterprises that provide employment and financial independence for thousands of women, transforming rural economies. The same holds for climate action. [Research](#) shows that countries with greater female representation in parliament are more likely to ratify international environmental treaties and implement stronger climate policies. Similarly, after a series of [earthquakes in Mexico](#) in 2017, women's groups played a key role in rescuing and rebuilding communities. Yet, their contributions often go unrecognized, despite evidence that gender-inclusive leadership leads to deeper, more sustainable outcomes.

As Dr. Mbungu pointed out, gender equality can be a key driver of the kind of societal wealth creation that is essential for livelihood security and climate resilience. But achieving it requires more than simply increasing women's participation in the market economy. Women currently spend over three times more time in unpaid domestic work than men, missing out on valued opportunities in the public domain. Research suggests that [closing gender gaps](#) in education and skills could add USD 10 trillion to the global economy, while investing in the care economy could create nearly [300 million jobs](#). The digital gender divide exacerbates economic inequality. Bridging this divide alone could [save over USD 500 billion](#). Yet, women remain concentrated in low-wage, informal and precarious jobs, earning [24% less than men](#) globally. At the current rate of progress, it will take [170 years](#) to close the gender pay gap.

It is these broader inequalities that must be addressed if economies are to realize their full potential to create wealth and promote wellbeing. For too long, ideas about 'greening' the economy has focused

narrowly on infrastructure, technology and finance, neglecting the fundamental question of who benefits. Without intentional efforts to break gender barriers, a just transition risks replicating the same inequalities that have long defined the market economy. Women, particularly in frontline communities, must be equipped with the skills, resources and decision-making power to lead the just transition agenda. To fully realize these benefits, however, participants agreed that we need to look beyond inclusion and to rethink the structures that shape economic and climate policies. The conversation has to be shifted from isolated interventions to systemic change.

Reframing the debate: the need for a holistic approach

Systemic change has to be guided by a holistic analysis of the problem. There is a tendency in many circles for the climate crisis to be [discussed in isolation](#) from social and economic injustice, with gender injustice added as an afterthought. Yet these injustices are deeply interconnected and need to be understood within a unified framework. Failing to recognize this reinforces pre-existing inequalities. As one of our participants noted, during the floods in Germany, emergency response plans failed to consider poorer, disabled and elderly populations. In other words, even in well-resourced economies, vulnerable communities are often left behind. The consequences tend to be even more severe in regions with fewer resources and many more vulnerable people.

While women's rights movements have historically focused on gender oppression, they also recognize that not all women experience discrimination in the same way. An intersectional lens is critical to the achievement of gender justice in the transition to a sustainable economy because it recognises that women experience multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination that differentiate their opportunities, access to resources and decision-making power. Factors such as race, class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, age and migrant status compound the barriers that most women face, demanding more nuanced and inclusive solutions. Indeed, as Professor Kabeer noted in her introduction, gender differentiates opportunities even among the most privileged classes: in the [global rich list](#) of the 20 richest people in the world in 2025, the richest woman is ranked 17th on the list while the only other woman is ranked 20th. However, she pointed out that women at the intersection of gender, class and other inequalities occupy a disproportionate share of the population at the other end of the wealth distribution: their livelihoods are the most precarious and they are most vulnerable to climate change.

Reframing the debate requires shifting from surface-level inclusion to systemic transformation. This means actively addressing intersectional barriers rather than assuming all women face the same challenges. To create meaningful change, all stakeholders must embrace intersectionality by:

- **Addressing diverse needs:** A one-size-fits-all approach to gender equality and climate action is ineffective. Policies must be tailored to the specific realities of women facing economic, racial and environmental disadvantages.
- **Preventing further marginalisation:** Without holistic awareness, policies risk benefiting only privileged groups, further entrenching inequality.
- **Building inclusive movements:** True progress requires diverse representation. However, we need to recognise that economic marginalisation exacerbates the effects of marginalised identities.
- **Transforming structural systems:** Justice is not about mere inclusion but about dismantling an economic system that perpetuates inequality across gender and climate policies.

A just transition must go beyond net-zero targets and renewable energy. It requires redistributing power, ensuring economic security for those most affected and dismantling the structures that have excluded women, and some more than others, in order to ensure that no one is left behind in this process.

Finding solutions: promising pathways to a gender-just transition

The solutions to these challenges are within reach. Fair wages, land rights and decision-making power are not distant ideals but tangible steps that can reshape economies and communities. The question is no longer whether gender justice should be central to climate action, but how quickly we can scale the solutions that already exist. Professor Kabeer drew on the paper that she has been writing during her fellowship at the Bosch Academy^{iv} to point to what she saw as recurring themes in discussions about promising pathways for a just and sustainable future that were being conducted by different constituencies:

- **Care as the heart of a just transition.** While unpaid and underpaid care work, primarily carried out by women, contributes to the capabilities that create wealth and are at the heart of a well-being economy, it remains invisible in current economic models. A just transition must recognise, redistribute and reward care work as essential to a sustainable future. This requires significant investment in universal childcare and elder care, and policies such as paid family leave and flexible work arrangements. It also requires enabling men to play a greater role in both paid and unpaid care work.
- **Social protection is essential for building resilience.** It enables people to break cycles of poverty and exclusion, prepare for and withstand crises, recover from shocks, and build a sustainable future. Universal social protection provides a safety net, empowering women and vulnerable groups to secure their well-being and plan for the future. Strengthening these protections fosters greater equity and long-term sustainability for current and future generations.
- **Global climate finance and economic systems must be reimaged.** The world's wealthiest 1% own 76% of global wealth, yet climate finance mechanisms continue to burden the Global South with debt rather than holding historic polluters accountable. Redistributive justice must be at the core of climate action. Corporations must be held accountable. Progressive taxation and gender-just climate finance must be employed to redistribute resources fairly.
- **The role of the state is critical in building a just future.** The role of the states features in many of the discussions about promising pathways. They agree that it must take an active role in driving policies that promote justice and sustainability, strengthening civil society, and supporting excluded communities. This includes building societal will, forging alliances with CSOs, excluded voices and grassroots movements, and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups, whether in cities, neighbourhoods or rural areas.
- **Transnational, transregional and local solidarity.** However, these discussions also agree that building solidarity within and across societies is key to holding states accountable and achieving systemic change. To shift from a lose-lose to a win-win approach, it is necessary to build alliances that connect movements across borders, from women's rights to climate justice. It also includes mobilizing men, many of whom feel marginalized by the current economic system. Such alliances will help ensure that the voices of the most excluded—those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy—are empowered to shape climate policy, rather than merely respond to it.

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ⁱ <https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/Wellbeing-and-Feminist-Foreign-Policy-AFFPC-Issue-Paper-11-1-1.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://afripoli.org/creating-a-just-social-order-the-role-of-gender-equity-in-climate-action>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://theconversation.com/women-are-seen-as-saviours-or-victims-in-climate-change-debates-why-this-is-a-problem-244529>

^{iv} Kabeer, N. (forthcoming). *Gender justice and the wellbeing economy: concepts, findings and promising pathways*. Paper prepared during her Fellowship at the Bosch Academy