

Event summary: delivering a gender-inclusive climate transition in India

Held on 29 February 2024, an event titled “How can we deliver a gender-inclusive climate transition in India?” convened experts from various disciplines to explore the intersection of gender, climate change and economic empowerment.

Introduction to the event and speakers

The webinar, jointly organised by the London School of Economics’ (LSE) Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and the Gender Studies Department, explored strategies for achieving a gender-inclusive climate transition in India. The session featured insights from the following distinguished speakers:

- **Professor Naila Kabeer**, Professor of Gender and Development at LSE’s Department of International Development, chaired the event.
- **Reema Nanavaty**, Executive Director of Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) India, delivered the keynote address, where she highlighted the pivotal role of women, particularly in the informal economy, in addressing climate change through grassroots efforts and community-centric climate action plans.
- **Dr. Garima Sahai**, Research Associate at the University of Cambridge, explored the challenges and strategies related to labour force participation and underscored the need to address gender segregation in green jobs.
- **Dr. Suravee Nayak**, Associate Fellow with Sustainable Futures Collaborative Research Foundation India, examined the marginalisation of women in India’s coal economy and highlighted the opportunities for their active participation in the clean energy transition.
- **Dr. Sohini Kar**, Associate Professor at LSE, focused on the barriers to accessing climate finance for women and offered solutions to improve their financial inclusion within India’s social banking system.
- **Dr. Swayamprabha Das**, Associate Vice-President with the Development Alternative Group, shared insights into green jobs, eco-entrepreneurship, and the supportive policies necessary for facilitating women’s participation in the green economy.

Key messages

- Women, especially those in vulnerable and informal sectors, are disproportionately affected by climate change, but are also at the forefront of adaptation efforts and community-led innovation.
- An inclusive approach to climate action that also leverages the knowledge and capabilities of women is essential for effective and localised change.
- Green skilling and job creation in renewable energy sectors offer significant opportunities for women’s economic empowerment and environmental sustainability.
- Structural barriers, such as limited access to finance and education, hinder women’s full participation in the green economy and thus necessitate targeted interventions and public policy support.

Inclusive policymaking and climate action

Empowering local voices: Reema Nanavaty showcased SEWA's holistic approach to the climate transition, which focuses on empowering women at the grassroots level to spearhead climate action. This approach underscores the idea that those most affected by climate change, often women in rural and informal economies, hold key insights and solutions for sustainable development. Leveraging their traditional knowledge and community networks enables these women to devise practical, localised strategies for adaptation and resilience. There is also an urgent need to design innovative policies, structures and mechanisms to help these women to access green carbon credit and to form carbon-savings groups – thereby accessing innovative financing solutions to scale up their climate action.

Innovative initiatives: SEWA's initiatives, such as the Swachh Aakash (Clean Skies) Campaign and Hariyali Green Villages programme, exemplify how local, women-led actions can significantly enhance climate resilience. These efforts not only raise awareness about climate change, but they also foster the adoption of clean energy solutions tailored to the specific needs and resources of local communities. This includes training programmes that enhance women's technical skills and participation in the diffusion of green technologies. By addressing environmental challenges and improving women's economic self-sufficiency simultaneously, these programmes exemplify how community-centric planning and women's empowerment can converge to foster sustainable development.

Gender-transformative policies: the panellists stressed the critical need for a 'gender-transformative' approach to climate policy and planning. This approach goes beyond mere representation, aiming to fundamentally alter the power dynamics and structural inequalities that hinder women's full participation in the green transition. It calls for the active participation of women in decision-making processes, an acknowledgment of their roles and contributions, and provides specific support for their leadership in climate action, including facilitating access to education, resources and opportunities.

Advocacy and representation: the discussion underscored the importance of strong women-led advocacy and representation to ensure women's voices are included in climate policy discussions. By promoting women's leadership within environmental and climate organisations, we can achieve gender balance in policymaking bodies, and amplify the voices of marginalised women, particularly those from indigenous and rural communities.

Green jobs and economic empowerment

Addressing structural barriers: the transition to a green economy offers opportunities for women's economic empowerment through green jobs and entrepreneurship. However, Dr. Garima Sahai and Dr. Swayamprabha Das pointed out that without proactive measures in place, the persistent and historical gender segregation seen in the labour market could continue into green jobs. Despite the growing demand for labour in the renewable energy sector, women face significant obstacles, such as pipeline barriers in early and higher education, and which employment sectors are socially seen to be 'open' to women, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. Targeted interventions are needed to dismantle the structural barriers that impede women's entry and retention in these sectors.

Strategies include:

- **Addressing the green jobs information gap that women face**, particularly for male-dominated roles. These awareness campaigns should target both young women and their families to encourage early and wide-ranging participation.
- **Enhancing women's access to STEM education**, such as with targeted scholarships.
- **Creating an environment that supports women's participation in non-traditional roles**. Parental leave, especially maternal, and childcare support are crucial for young women's entry into the workforce, especially in traditionally male-dominated fields.
- **Recognising the value of informal sectors and redefining 'green jobs'** to include sectors like agriculture where women already have a significant presence. Future green skilling programmes can begin by targeting these first and reducing the gendered pay gaps that exist in these fields. By **opening up future** pathways for upskilling and formalisation, policymakers and practitioners can forge more inclusive and equitable opportunities for women in the green economy.
- **Reducing the gendered division of labour** will further facilitate women's entry into male-dominated green jobs. This can be done by encouraging men to engage in traditionally female-dominated roles within the home to help create more equitable sharing of care responsibilities at home and in the community.

A gender-inclusive transition away from coal: Dr. Suravee Nayak emphasised the male-centric nature of India's just transition discourse risks perpetuating gender inequalities as we move away from coal to green energy. The key issues are:

- A lack of recognition and under-representation of women in the coal industry, where they predominantly hold precarious, informal or low-paid positions.
- The geographical and sectoral gap between coal and clean energy industries further excludes women from transition discussions.

A gender-transformative transition should recognise women's contributions, utilise women's organisations (like self-help groups) to amplify community voices, promote women-led enterprises for economic diversification, and consider the socioeconomic impacts of broader climate policy decisions on women. Gender justice in energy transition discussions should be re-evaluated to ensure it also prioritises women's active and equal participation within the evolving traditional and green energy sectors.

Access to climate finance

Innovative financing solutions: Dr. Sohini Kar discussed the urgent need for accessible and innovative financing mechanisms that are tailored to women entrepreneurs and workers in the green economy. Traditional banking and financial services often fail to adequately serve the specific needs of women; the scale of credit available is also very small, especially for women in rural areas or informal sectors. Successful models of microfinance and blended finance, such as Microfinance Mahila Housing Trust, provide examples of ways to support women's climate resilience initiatives.

Policy support: the discussion also called for further greening and inclusivity of policy interventions made in Priority Sector Lending to specifically improve women's access to climate finance. There is a need to develop and implement policies that give priority to women-led enterprises, incorporate gender considerations into climate financing mechanisms, and bolster women's cooperatives and networks that facilitate access to credit and investment.

Reframing support delivered through climate finance: mirroring discussions within broader international climate finance, the discussion on building up climate resilience of the poor and vulnerable sections of society needs to advance beyond offering credit to providing grants. Solutions to surviving climate impacts should not increase the burden of indebtedness and risk.