United Nations University
Institute for Water, Environment and Health

GENDER IMBALANCE

Progress and Challenges in Achieving Gender-Inclusive Representation in Global Environmental Governance



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Gender Imbalance: Progress and Challenges in Achieving Gender-Inclusive Representation in Global Environmental Governance

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The United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) is one of 13 institutions comprising the United Nations University (UNU), the academic arm of the United Nations. Established in 1996 through an agreement with the Government of Canada, UNU-INWEH is headquartered in the City of Richmond Hill, Ontario.

UNU-INWEH specializes in addressing critical global security and development challenges at the intersection of water, environment, and health. Through research, capacity development, policy engagement, and knowledge dissemination, the institute bridges the gap between scientific evidence and the practical needs of policymakers and UN member states, with particular attention to low- and middle-income countries.
By collaborating with a diverse array of partners—including UN agencies, governments, academia, the private sector, and civil society—UNU-INWEH develops solutions that advance human security, resilience, and sustainability worldwide.

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Glossary of Abbreviations and Key Terms

CBD	The Convention on Biological Diversity, a 1992 treaty aimed at conserving biodiversity, promoting sustainable use of biological resources, and ensuring fair sharing of benefits from genetic resources[1].
COP	Conferences of the Parties. These conferences are key decision-making events for international climate policy.
Focal Point	A national representative who is responsible for coordinating and advancing convention agendas.
GDP	Gross Domestic Product is the total monetary value of all goods and services produced within in a country's borders over a specific time period, usually annually. It is one of the most widely used indicators of a country's economic performance.
Gender	The roles, behaviours, activities, attributes, and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for boys and girls, men and women, including the often-overlooked individuals in non-binary categories. Gender also pertains to the relationships between people and can reflect the power distribution within those relationships[2].
Gender Equality	Equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and outcomes for all genders beyond numerical balance. Ensuring the different behaviours, aspirations, goals, and needs of women, men, and gender-diverse individuals are equally valued and favoured. A fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable worldrelationships between people and can reflect the power distribution within those relationships[2].
Gender Parity	Equal numerical representation of all identified genders in specified (e.g., decision-making) roles.
Inclusive Governance	Decision-making processes that reflect diverse perspectives for equitable outcomes.
Gender-Inclusive Representation	Equitable inclusion of diverse groups, particularly across gender lines, in decision-making processes to capture varied perspectives and ensure fair outcomes, especially in policy and governance settings.
Intersectionality	The interconnectedness of social identities, such as race, gender, class, age, disability, and sexual orientation, and how these different aspects of a person's identity intersect and interact to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege, shaping inclusion.
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals are a set of 17 global goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030.
UNCCD	The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, a 1992 treaty focused on combating desertification, land degradation, and drought, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions.
UNFCCC	The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, an international treaty established in 1992 to address global climate change through mitigation, adaptation, and cooperative action[4].
UN Rio Conventions	The three international environmental agreements, the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD, adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, respectively, address climate change, biodiversity loss, and desertification.

Executive Summary



COP29 Day 9 Commonwealth Secretariat Side Event "Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Climate Action/ Building a Resilient Future for All In Collaboration with the Governments of Namibia and Seychelles and the UNFCCC". Photo by Commonwealth Secretariat, Flickr.

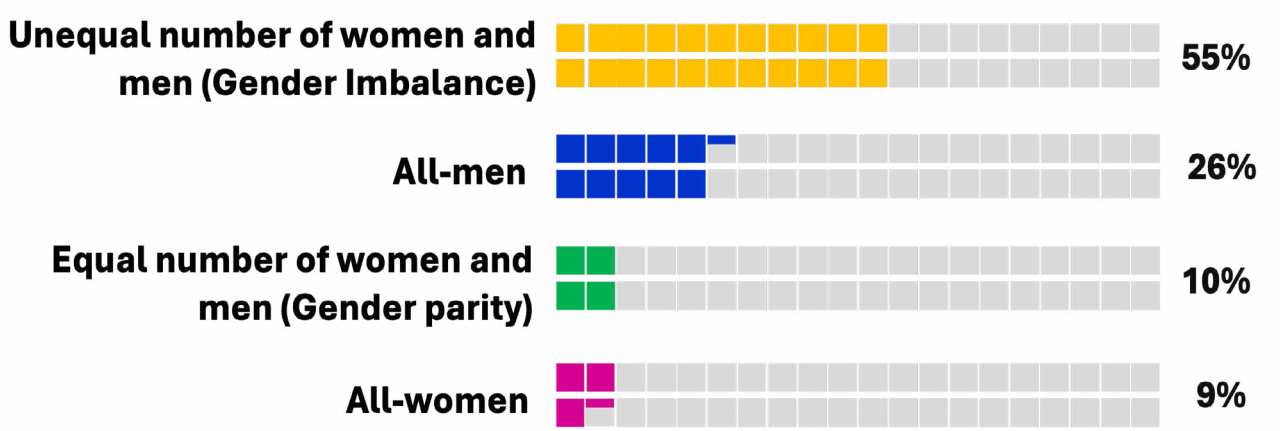
Inclusive representation is fundamental to equitable and effective environmental governance, particularly in addressing the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. Moving beyond the parity lens, this report emphasizes the need for gender-inclusive governance that recognizes the roles, knowledge, and needs of all genders, including women, men, and gender-diverse individuals, and other intersecting identities such as age, differently abled groups, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Gender balance, understood here as equitable representation across genders, is crucial to social justice, providing access to more diverse decision-making processes and leveraging different capabilities and perspectives in addressing the triple planetary crisis. This diversity helps ensure that environmental policies address gender-specific needs, such as equitable access to resources during crises, leading to more robust and sustainable outcomes.

This report of the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) analyzes the gender composition of national focal points across the three major UN environmental conventions, commonly known as the Rio Conventions, namely the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The gender analysis is based on available sex-disaggregated data (women and men) of national focal points as of 2024, as reported by 194 UN Member States across five regions. The analysis acknowledges the absence of non-binary data and interprets the binary findings within a broader framework of inclusivity. Focal points serve as primary contacts and national representatives to the UN Rio Conventions, influencing agenda-setting, negotiations, and policy implementation. Their gender composition provides insight into broader patterns of representation in global environmental governance and calls for structural reforms to promote equitable, inclusive, and intersectional representative leadership structures. As the global community seeks effective solutions to environmental challenges, inclusive governance is a moral imperative essential to legitimacy, accountability, and action. This report positions inclusiveness - not only numerical balance - as a strategic necessity for equitable, effective, and sustainable environmental governance amid the triple planetary crisis.

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Key Findings

- Across all three Rio conventions (UNFCCC, UNCCD, and CBD), there is a substantial gender imbalance, with 496 male focal points (60%), compared to 334 female focal points (40%) as of 2024.
- Regional disparities are striking. Africa shows the largest gender gap (157 men vs 52 women) while women are in majority in Western Europe has more women focal points (50 men vs 59 women) and Eastern Europe (33 men vs 67 women).
- 51 countries have exclusively male focal points across all three conventions, while 17 countries have exclusively female focal points. Only 19 countries have achieved gender-balanced representation, reflecting systemic barriers to equitable participation.
- Inclusive governance must move from aspiration to action, prioritizing balanced and representative participation across genders and regions in environmental decision-making.



The national gender comparions of the focal points of the UN Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, UNCCD, CBD) as of 2024.

moral imperative essential to legitimacy, accountability, and action. This report positions inclusiveness - not only numerical balance - as a strategic necessity for equitable, effective, and sustainable environmental governance amid the triple planetary crisis.

The persistent gender imbalance in the focal points of the Rio Conventions may signal systemic barriers that could potentially hinder equitable environmental governance. This imbalance, particularly pronounced in regions like Africa, may reflect entrenched societal norms and institutional practices that tend to prioritize male leadership. Such imbalances can limit the integration of diverse perspectives, which are critical for addressing complex global challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. Women's underrepresentation in these roles raises concerns that gender-specific needs may be overlooked, weakening the effectiveness of environmental policies. The absence of diverse voices risks contributing to inequitable outcomes, as policies might fail to fully address the unique vulnerabilities and contributions of women, who are disproportionately affected by environmental crises.
Considering the available convention-specific dataset, UNCCD exhibits the highest gender imbalance, followed by UNFCCC and CBD. This consistent male dominance across all three conventions suggests that global commitments to gender equality, acknowledged for over three decades, have not translated into meaningful transformations across the world. Gender imbalance weakens the legitimacy and inclusivity of decision-making processes. This exclusion not only perpetuates social inequities but is also expected to compromise the ability of global governance to address interconnected planetary crises effectively.

Regional disparities further highlight the uneven progress toward gender balance. While women are in the majority in both Western Europe and Eastern Europe, Africa's stark gender gap points to region-specific structural barriers, such as limited access to education, employment prospects, and leadership opportunities for women. The existence of 51 countries with exclusively male focal points across all conventions, compared to only 17 with exclusively female representation, highlights the global scale of this challenge. However, the 19 countries achieving gender parity demonstrate that institutional reform can yield transformative outcomes to effectively reshape governance and promote gender inclusivity.

Overall, **the gender representation gap among the governmental focal points of the UN Rio Conventions is acute, threatening global environmental governance.** Achieving gender balance in global environmental governance is both a moral imperative and a practical necessity for addressing the interconnected environmental crises. By dismantling systemic barriers and prioritizing inclusive representation, the Rio Conventions can lead, crafting equitable, innovative, and sustainable policies. This report **calls for a shift from aspiration to action, leveraging gender parity to harness diverse perspectives and ensure a resilient future for all.**



People walking outside COP16- the 16th session of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)- in Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh, on 2 December 2024. Photo by Fayez Nureldine, AFP via Getty Images.

1. Unpacking Gender Imbalance



Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary of CBD, speaks during the last plenary session of the COP16 Summit in Cali, Colombia on November 1, 2024. Photo by Joanquin Sarmiento, Getty Images.

Gender imbalance, characterized by the unequal representation and treatment of individuals across gender identities, manifests in disparities in access to opportunities, resources, and societal outcomes. In contrast, gender balance, particularly within environmental governance, entails equitable representation and treatment of all genders, encouraging inclusive decision-making by integrating diverse perspectives.

Gender imbalance emerges from societal structures and norms that disproportionately prioritize one gender over others. This issue is evident in the underrepresentation of women in leadership and public spheres. For instance, only 22.9% of cabinet members heading ministries globally in 2025 are women, a decline from 2024, reflecting persistent structural barriers.[5] The remaining disparities result in unequal access to resources, decision-making power, and personal and professional development opportunities.

The consequences of gender imbalance are complex, spanning economic and social domains. Economically, the exclusion of underrepresented genders constrains financial growth potential. The World Bank estimates that closing gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship could increase global GDP by more than 20%, potentially doubling the global growth rate over the next decade.[6] In society, gender imbalance perpetuates cycles of discrimination and exclusion, undermining social cohesion and reinforcing systemic inequities.[7] For individuals, particularly non-binary persons, the lack of recognition and inclusion exacerbates marginalization, leading to diminished self-esteem, inhibited ambitions, and adverse mental health outcomes.[8]

In contrast, achieving gender balance offers a transformative pathway toward greater inclusion, enhanced credibility, and long-term sustainability. Gender balance enriches decision-making processes with diverse perspectives, enhancing organizational performance, innovation, and resilience.[9] Societies that value all genders equally can harness the full spectrum of human potential, driving progress across sectors. Moreover, gender balance advances social justice by dismantling systemic barriers. Policies targeting gender gaps, such as equitable pay frameworks, empower individuals to thrive irrespective of gender.[10] Countries with robust gender equality policies consistently rank higher in human development indices, illustrating the practical value of gender balance.[11] Beyond systemic benefits, gender balance nurtures individuals' well-being by creating environments where diverse gender identities are recognized and valued, and individuals can truly express themselves. By affirming the humanity of all individuals, gender balance cultivates cultures of respect and belonging, critical elements essential for cohesive societies. Inclusive governance, rooted in recognition of all genders and marginalized groups, is not merely aspirational but essential for effective environmental action. By expanding the lens of inclusive representation into policy frameworks, environmental governance can transition from tokenistic representation toward meaningful participation.

While gender balance is a critical strategy for fostering greater inclusion, it is important to recognize that it represents a specific, quantifiable measure within the broader goal of diversity. Achieving gender balance ensures equitable numerical representation across genders, but it does not automatically guarantee diversity across other dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, age, or professional background. Thus, gender balance serves as a foundational step toward diversity, which encompasses a wider range of perspectives and experiences essential for holistic environmental governance. Inclusive and intersectional approaches are therefore essential for understanding how structural inequalities compound disadvantages for certain groups. Such approaches reinforce that inclusivity is not merely a numerical exercise but a holistic strategy for equitable governance and sustainable environmental outcomes.



"Making Every Woman and Girl Count" programme at a side event during the 71st UN General Assembly, co-organized by UN Women, the Government of Australia, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Data2X. Photo by Ryan Brown, UN Women.

Furthermore, assessing gender balance can be resourceful as a critical mechanism for diagnosing systemic inequalities. By identifying disparities in representation and outcomes, such assessments can reveal underlying power dynamics that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization.[12] The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership highlights how institutional structures favour male-dominated models. Similarly, the exclusion of non-binary individuals from data collection processes renders their experiences invisible, limiting the effectiveness of policy and research interventions.[13] Even more, the intersection of gender imbalance with other social identities, such as race, class, disability, and sexual orientation, amplifies the diagnostic value of gender balance assessment, compounding marginalization.[12] Through an inclusive and intersectional lens, including leveraging behavioural change approaches, practitioners, scholars, and policymakers can identify specific areas for systemic interventions, such as targeted mentorship programs or inclusive policy frameworks, to address these complex dynamics.

This report by the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) analyzes the gender composition of national focal points across the three major UN environmental conventions, commonly known as the Rio Conventions, namely the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The gender analysis is based on available sex-disaggregated data (women and men) of national focal points as of 2024, as reported by 194 UN Member States across five regions. Focal points serve as primary contacts and national representatives



COP 16 President Susana Muhamad, Colombia, gavels the decision on the multilateral benefit-sharing mechanism from the use of digital sequence information. Photo by Mike Muzurakis, Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB), International Institue for Sustainable Development (IISD).



Iziaq Adekunle Salako, Minister of State for Environment, Nigeria, in 2024 CBD COP16. Photo by Angeles Estrada Vigil, Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB), International Institue for Sustainable Development (IISD).

to the UN Rio Conventions, influencing agenda-setting, negotiations, and policy implementation. The report aims to provide insight into broader patterns of representation in global environmental governance and calls for more inclusive and equitable leadership structures. As the global community seeks effective solutions to environmental challenges, inclusive governance is a moral imperative essential to legitimacy, accountability, and action. This report also highlights the critical need for gender balance to ensure equitable, effective, and sustainable environmental governance amid the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. As gender imbalance is a threat to equity and global development, gender balance is a strategic necessity for sustainable development, echoing broader debates on managing complex social systems.14 By leveraging gender balance assessment as a diagnostic tool, as shown in this report, we can better understand and dismantle systemic inequities.

While this analysis primarily relies on binary sex-disaggregated data (women and men), it is critical to acknowledge that gender is a broader spectrum encompassing other underrepresented identities. This is of particular importance as non-binary individuals face additional challenges, as binary gender norms often exclude them from equitable participation in workplaces and civic spaces.[15] Despite this major limitation due to the lack of public data, the analysis and the provided insights will be a step forward in identifying the major gaps of global environmental diplomacy, leadership, and governance in terms of gender imbalance that require the attention and urgent action of the UN system and the member states.

2. Gender Analysis of UN Rio Conventions' Focal Points



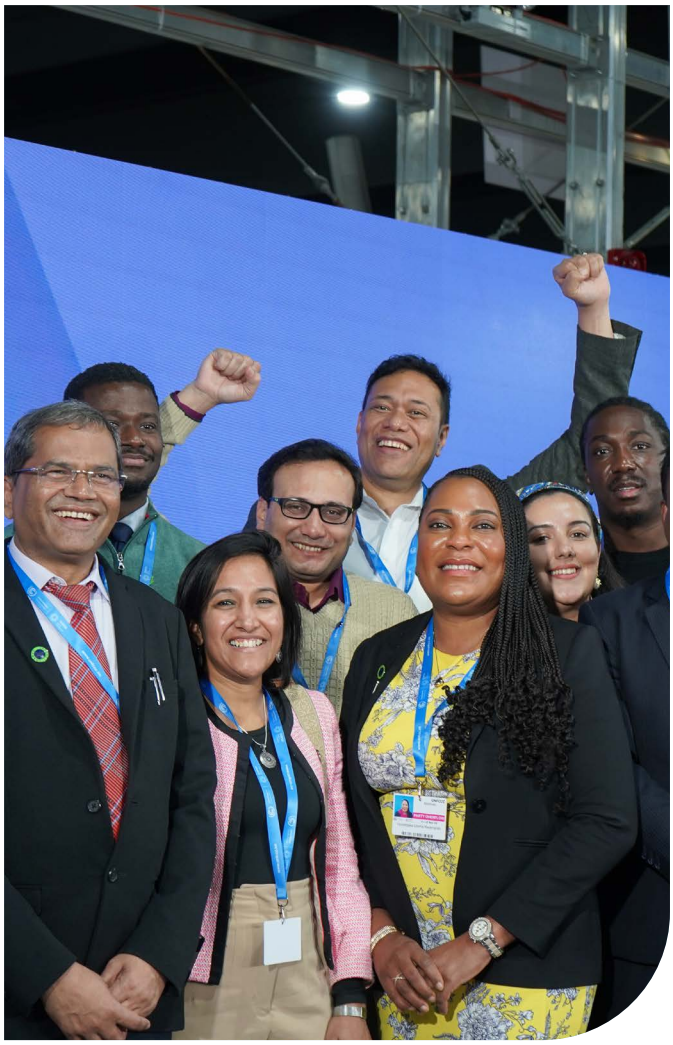
High-level representatives attended the Beijing+30 kickoff at the 79th UN General Assembly on 21 September 2024 in New York, launching the process to highlight gender equality progress and challenges. Photo by Radhika Chalasani, UN Women.

This analysis employed a quantitative approach, guided by the Gender and Development (GAD) framework,[16] to assess gender representation patterns across 194 UN Member States. The GAD framework, rooted in analyzing systemic gender relations and structural inequities in pursuit of gender equity and inclusiveness, especially in global development policies and programs, provides a strong foundation for examining gender imbalances and the broader inclusivity gaps in global environmental governance. Unlike other frameworks, such as Women in Development (WID), which often focus on integrating women's needs, concerns, and aspirations into existing systems without effectively challenging structural norms, GAD takes a more inclusive, relational approach that actively seeks to transform institutional and societal structures. It recognizes that all genders, including gender-diverse individuals, hold responsibilities within the development process and that any meaningful shift towards equitable governance must include changes in the power dynamics that govern gender relationships.

Data were collected from the official databases of the UNFCCC, UNCCD, and CBD, specifically from their national focal points' registries as of 2024. The analysis included 830 focal points across the three conventions, with 319 from UNFCCC, 269 from UNCCD, and 242 from CBD. Regional classifications followed the UN Department of General Assembly and Conference Management's system, dividing countries into five regions: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Western Europe. This enabled a comparative analysis of gender distribution across geographic and cultural contexts.



The 2024 Gender Just Climate Solutions Awards in 2024 COP29 UNFCCC. Photo by the Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF) and the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC).



COP29 - Day 9 - Youth-SG dialogue. Photo by Commonwealth Secretariat.

The quantitative approach involved calculating gender distribution proportions within each convention and region, identifying countries with exclusive gender representation, and assessing gender parity. This enabled the mapping of both gender balance and imbalance patterns across global regions. The analysis was supplemented with qualitative insights from secondary sources, open-access media, and documents like UN Women and World Bank reports, which contextualized the implications of gender imbalances and lack of broader inclusiveness for environmental governance effectiveness, drawing connections between representation patterns and policy outcomes.

While the available dataset reflects only the binary gender categories (women and men), these proportions can potentially serve as a proxy to understand systemic patterns that may similarly affect marginalized individuals. The lack of data results in excluding non-binary individuals and other diversity metrics, such as age, ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, or professional background, which are critical for a comprehensive understanding of inclusive governance. This limitation underscores the need for more inclusive data collection by the conventions and member states in future reporting.

3. Gender Representation in Rio Conventions: Disparities, Impacts, and Pathways to Parity



Delegates around the venue in 2024 COP29 UNFCCC. Photo by Habib Samadov.

Across all conventions, there is a substantial gender imbalance, with 496 male focal points (60%) compared to 334 female focal points (40%). This disparity varies significantly by region and convention. Regionally, African states have the most pronounced gender gap, with 157 male focal points (75%) to 52 female focal points (25%). The Asia-Pacific region follows with 167 male representatives (63%) to 100 female representatives (37%), and the Latin America & Caribbean region with 96 male representatives (57%) to 71 female representatives (43%). Eastern European and Western European states demonstrate a reverse pattern, with 52 women (67%) outnumbering 26 men (33%) and 59 women (54%) outnumbering 50 men (46%), respectively (Table 2). Convention-specific analysis indicates that UNFCCC has the highest total number of focal points (319), followed by UNCCD (269) and CBD (242). Gender disparity is observed within each convention as male focal points (UNFCCC: 59%; UNCCD: 65%; and CBD: 55%) consistently outnumber the female ones.

For over three decades, the need for equitable and meaningful participation of all genders in environmental governance has been widely acknowledged,[17] yet gender imbalance persists, hindering progress. This deeply entrenched inequality, rooted in systemic barriers, severely undermines the development of equitable and inclusive environmental policies across regions and international conventions. Women's underrepresentation in focal point roles highlights a gap between global commitments and the institutional reforms needed for equitable leadership. Interpreting these patterns through an inclusiveness lens highlights that the same structural barriers limiting women's participation likely also affect gender-diverse individuals, though current data does not yet capture their representation. Addressing these disparities demands urgent, targeted interventions to ensure women's and marginalized voices shape robust and transformative environmental strategies.

The consequences of women's exclusion from environmental governance are profound and far-reaching, obstructing the integration of gender-specific needs into climate adaptation strategies and limiting equitable access to vital resources like water during crises. Similarly, biodiversity conservation efforts often fail to leverage women's extensive traditional ecological knowledge, diminishing community resilience against environmental threats. These omissions not only perpetuate inequity but also weaken the effectiveness of global environmental policies, as inclusive perspectives are essential for tackling the complex challenges addressed by each convention to deliver resilient and sustainable environmental outcomes. Without dismantling systemic barriers - through concrete accountability mechanisms and institutional reforms - gender disparities will continue to hinder the development of policies that reflect the needs and insights of all genders.

Countries show diverse approaches to gender representation, ranging from exclusive representation (all men or all women) to full parity (equal numbers of men and women). Notably, 51 countries maintain exclusively male representation across all three conventions, while 17 countries feature exclusively female representation. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Peru lead with the most female focal points (8 of 8 focal points each), followed by Vanuatu (7 of 7 focal points). Approximately 19 countries maintain a gender-balanced representation across all conventions, suggesting that representation patterns may result from national institutional approaches to focal point appointments rather than convention-specific considerations. These patterns may also reflect in-country political structures and cultural traditions rather than solely a country's commitment to gender balance.

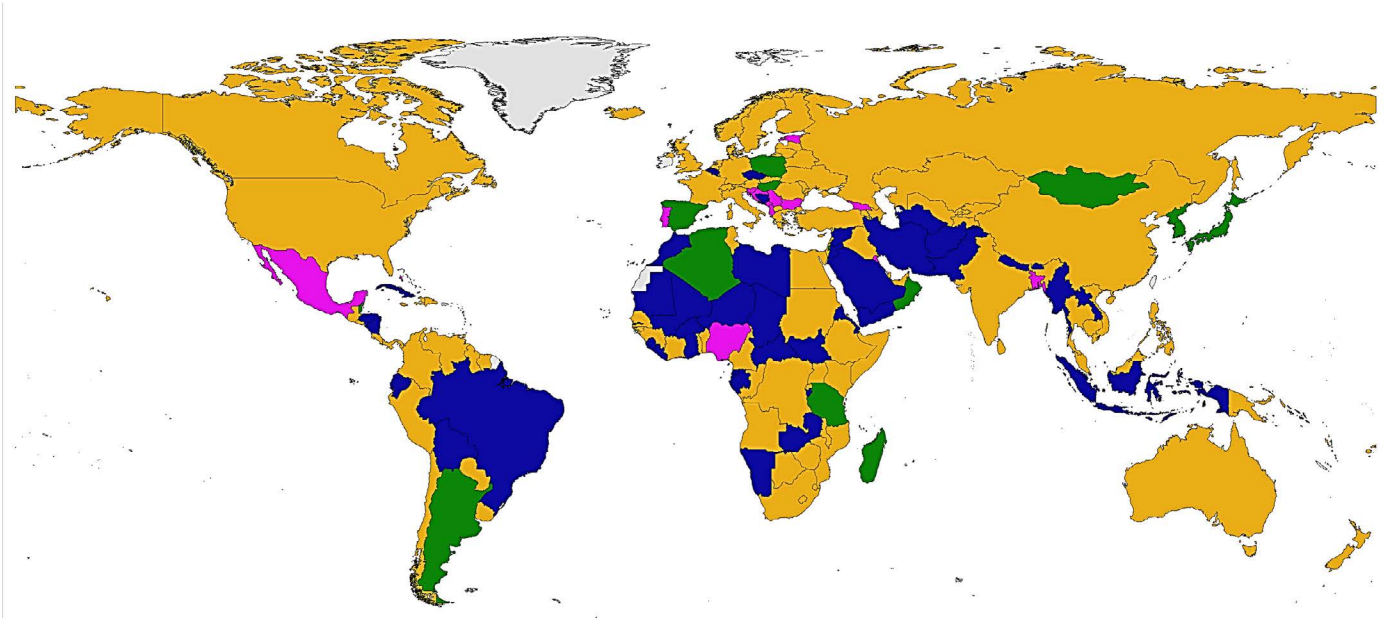


Figure 1: *A global overview of gender parity among the focal points of the three Rio Conventions as of 2024*

Table 1: Regional[18] gender representation (%) across the major Rio Conventions as of 2024

Region	UNFCCC (319 Focal Points)		UNCCD (269 Focal Points)		CBD (242 Focal Points)		All Rio Conventions (830 Focal Points)	
	Women(%)	Men(%)	Women(%)	Men(%)	Women(%)	Men(%)	Women(%)	Men(%)
Africa	26	74	14	86	36	64	25	75
Asia-Pacific	35	65	37	63	43	57	37	63
Eastern European	66	34	60	40	75	25	67	33
Latin American & Caribbean	46	54	42	58	38	62	43	57
Western European	63	37	43	57	56	44	54	46
Global	41	59	35	65	45	55	40	60

4. Inclusive Environmental Governance: Progress and Challenges



African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) Launches Ugandan Chapter. Photo by Women's International Peace Centre.

Key Considerations for Gender-Inclusive Governance

- How can gender balance ensure equitable environmental policies without tokenism?
- What role does diverse representation play in addressing systemic biases in merit-based selection?
- How do intersecting identities shape effective environmental leadership?

This gender analysis shows that UN Member States have no uniform strategy in the composition of focal points for the major COPs. Instead, representation varies significantly, ranging from exclusive representation to full gender parity, and from minimal to more inclusive patterns of participation.

Of the 194 member states, slightly more than half (107 countries; 55%) have imbalanced gender representation (unequal number of men and women focal points) across all conventions. This suggests partial efforts toward gender inclusiveness, but not fully equitable representation. Some member states have focal point groups that are composed exclusively of men (51 countries; 26%) or women (17 countries; 9%), reflecting a lack of gender balance. Only 19 member states (10%) achieved gender parity, reflecting a commitment to equal representation of men and women.

Some nations and institutions have made progress toward gender balance[9] through measures like gender quotas. For instance, gender quotas in institutions such as the African Union and European Commission have driven progress in various sectors. In parliaments, Rwanda has achieved over 60% female representation, and Uganda has achieved 40%. In corporate boards, EU countries like France and Italy have reached 38% female board members in large-listed companies.[19,20] Nonetheless, true inclusiveness goes beyond numerical parity; it requires meaningful participation from underrepresented groups. In certain societies, women's presence in certain high-level roles may be symbolic, aimed at gaining political and reputational gains rather than ensuring substantive influence. Symbolic activities that only improve representation of a certain gender in appearance without granting real decision-making power undermine the goals of gender parity and fail to deliver genuine inclusiveness. Tokenism can reinforce patriarchal systems and perpetuate existing inequalities in power structures, hindering sustainable and equitable changes in environmental and social outcomes. While some progress has been made toward gender balance, there is still a wide range of practices and levels of commitment among different countries, and parity metrics alone do not fully reflect inclusiveness or power-sharing. That calls for a more nuanced approach - one that prioritizes both representation and influence and actively dismantles systemic barriers to participation for all genders.



Figure 2: *The national gender compositions of Focal Points of the UN Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, UNCCD, CBD) as of 2024.*

The goal of inclusive representation is not to favour one gender over another but to achieve equitable representation that leverages diverse perspectives based on a wide range of viewpoints and experiences, both lived and professional, for effective environmental governance and more comprehensive solutions. Without this balance, important insights and contributions from underrepresented gender groups may be overlooked, constituting missed opportunities, especially those from marginalized individuals, whose absence in leadership and decision-making is currently invisible in global datasets. The prevalence and magnitude of current water, climate, and environmental crises indicate that every skill and opportunity, regardless of gender, should be leveraged for needed actions/interventions to curtail the menace and negative impacts of these crises.

Inclusive and equitable gender representation is a fundamental aspect of social and environmental justice. When delegations show limited gender balance, whether in favour of men or women and particularly in small team sizes, commitments to inclusive governance and equal opportunity become potentially questionable, undermining efforts to promote equal gender rights and opportunities globally. Reducing gender inclusivity to women's inclusivity can also weaken the collective efforts toward reaching gender inclusivity. For example, one may raise concerns about the gender diversity of the Gender and Biodiversity focal points of the parties to the CBD. The current composition (100% female) may potentially reinforce gender biases. In contexts where women have been historically underrepresented, deliberate efforts to prioritize female representation, without excluding others, can be a corrective measure to foster more balanced and inclusive governance. Nonetheless, even when actions solely pursue the improved representation of women, environmental decision-making can benefit from the involvement of non-women.

The analysis results highlight the ongoing challenges in achieving truly inclusive governance, which is essential for fair and effective environmental governance. Embedded within these challenges are other crucial nuances that must be explored and some fundamental questions that must be answered if the ultimate goal is delivering sustainable outcomes in environmental management:

- Is gender balance essential to tackling a critical environmental problem?
- Is a particular gender representation needed to deliver sustainable solutions?
- Is the intended gender equality action at odds with merit-based inclusion, undermining the efforts for gender empowerment and sustainable development, in the long run?

Generally, diverse teams, including gender-diverse ones, tend to make better decisions because they bring various perspectives and experiences compared to non-diverse groups. This diversity can lead to more inclusive solutions and to the development of policies that are potentially more acceptable. However, outcomes will not be solely determined by gender, and their success in practice depends on broader contextual factors.

A UN Women Report[5] on "Turning Promises to Action" specifically underscores the importance of gender equality in achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those related to environmental management, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation. Decision-making in these areas has historically been dominated by one gender.[21] While gender-balanced representation alone may not ensure desirable, sustainable outcomes, it plays a crucial role in enhancing decision-making, creating inclusive policies, and addressing historical biases, all of which contribute to more effective and sustainable solutions. Gender representation is not just a matter of equity but also a critical factor in achieving sustainable outcomes in environmental management.[22,23] Women and underserved groups disproportionately impacted by the water, environmental, and climate problems are critically needed to be meaningfully involved in sustainability efforts.



Rwandan Women Members of Parliament during their swearing in ceremony in 2013. Photo by New African Woman.

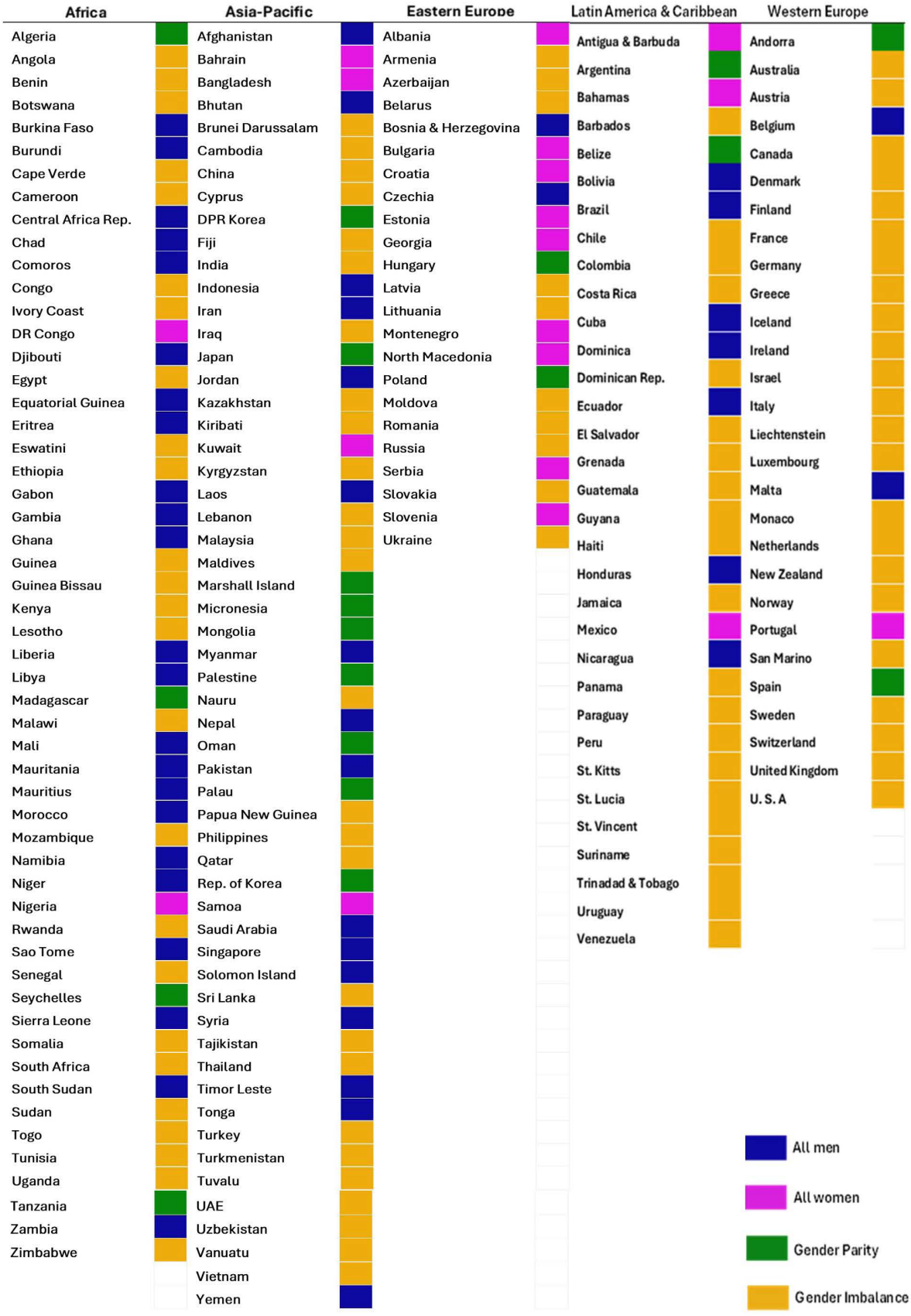


Figure 3: *Focal points of the UN Rio Conventions: National gender parity rankings by global region (2024).*

5. Merit and Gender Parity



Empowering women through UN Women's Second Chance Education (SCE) Programme in India. Photo by UN Women.

Integrating individual merit with gender parity is essential for achieving holistic and effective environmental governance, as the two are not mutually exclusive but complementary principles that strengthen sustainable outcomes. Merit, the basis of inclusive governance, traditionally refers to an individual's qualifications, skills, and expertise. In the context of gender representation and sustainable outcomes in environmental management, merit raises the critical question of whether individuals are selected based on their ability to contribute effectively, regardless of gender or other intersectional characteristics. Nonetheless, depending on the context, merit can also cover the value of diverse perspectives offered by different genders, bringing varied viewpoints and experiences that enhance problem-solving and decision-making processes.[24] Historically, merit-based systems have often been skewed by systemic biases that favoured one gender over another, frequently overlooking qualified individuals from underrepresented genders or marginalized communities. These biases represent a fundamental bottleneck that must be addressed to ensure that merit truly reflects the best candidates, including those with academic qualifications, experience, or unique contributions such as indigenous knowledge. At the individual level, merit should remain the primary basis for selection, ensuring that gender or social background does not override competence or fairness. However, at the group level, diversity and inclusivity are critical for fostering innovation and effectiveness. Studies consistently show that diverse teams, particularly those with improved gender diversity, are more innovative and better equipped to tackle complex challenges, as



On 18 January 1950, Marie-Hélène Lefaucheux (France), representing the UN Commission on the Status of Women, addressed the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities on discrimination against women. Before the meeting, she discussed a document with S. Grinberg-Vinaver (left), Chief of the UN Section on the Status of Women, as Rose Parsons (United States), Vice-President of the International Council of Women, looked on. Photo by MB, United Nations.



Participants observe International Women's Day 2023 on the theme "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality" during the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67). Photo by Ryan Brown, UN Women.

they bring a range of perspectives that enrich decision-making.[24]

Recognizing inclusive representation across all genders and marginalized identities as a component of merit requires a redefinition of traditional merit-based systems to account for the value of diverse gender-based perspectives in addition to other forms of diversity. This approach does not diminish the importance of individual qualifications but rather expands the concept of merit to include the collective benefits of inclusivity. By addressing historical biases and incorporating gender considerations into the selection process, governance structures can ensure that the best candidates are selected while also building diverse teams that drive sustainable outcomes.

Ultimately, merit and inclusive representation are intertwined in pursuing equitable environmental governance. While gender should not be the sole basis for selection and individual merit must remain the primary criterion, at the group level, diversity and inclusivity necessitate strong gender considerations. By prioritizing individual merit while simultaneously emphasizing inclusive representation at the group level, governance systems can overcome systemic biases and harness the full potential of diverse perspectives. This balanced approach ensures the selection of highly qualified individuals while fostering innovative, equitable, and sustainable solutions to pressing environmental challenges.

6. Addressing the Gender Gap in Global Environmental Governance



African Union Engages Stakeholders in Malawi on Women's Political Participation Ahead of the Impending 2025 General Elections. Photo by African Union.

Addressing gender disparities in environmental governance can directly strengthen policy outcomes. Inclusive representation ensures that climate adaptation, desertification mitigation, and biodiversity conservation strategies are equitable and effective, leveraging diverse insights to tackle planetary crises comprehensively. Dealing with the challenges of inclusive representation and gender parity in the critical global environmental arena, including the embedded nuances, requires major efforts and must benefit from various approaches that combine interventions and sustained commitment. The strategic framework presented in this report, while designed for environmental governance, outlines a pathway to systemic change and offers a transferable blueprint that may be adapted to dismantle structural barriers and achieve gender-inclusive representation across other sectors of international policy and diplomacy.

Establishing gender inclusive representation targets is a crucial first step toward addressing the underrepresentation of women and other marginalized groups in international environmental governance frameworks.[25] UN conventions, including the Rio Conventions, should adopt explicit targets for achieving inclusive representation among national focal points, with regular reporting mechanisms to track progress. These targets would provide a clear benchmark against which progress can be measured over time. Conventions should provide the UN Member States with guidelines emphasizing the importance of gender balance and diverse representation in focal point nominations. Implementing such guidelines can help overcome institutional barriers, which have historically limited women's participation in decision-making processes. Clear nomination procedures explicitly addressing gender considerations would motivate states to look beyond traditional selection pools when appointing delegates. UN Member States must be encouraged to commit to gender parity targets and implement regular reporting to ensure measurable and observable progress.

Capacity-building initiatives are equally important in this context. Targeted programs should be developed to support women and marginalized groups to participate meaningfully in convention activities, addressing barriers such as limited access to networks, resources, leadership opportunities, and financial resources for travel. Other forms of support, like family and childcare services, can also be provided to empower women and increase their representation. These initiatives are mostly important for representatives from developing nations, where gender disparities in environmental leadership roles are often more pronounced. Programs might include mentorship opportunities, leadership training, and dedicated funding to support women's participation in meetings and negotiations.

Creating regional frameworks for inclusive representation would complement these efforts. Regional coordination mechanisms should be established to share best practices and address region-specific barriers to gender balance. The effectiveness of such frameworks has been demonstrated in other international governance contexts, such as the African Union's Gender Strategy (GEWE)[26], suggesting potential applicability to environmental conventions. These regional approaches can account for cultural, political, and economic factors influencing gender representation in different geographic contexts. Special attention must be given to conflict-affected countries, where gender imbalance can be more severe. Ensuring women's participation in environmental governance in these settings is key to building inclusive and resilient institutions.



Military Gender Focal Points of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) attend Gender Awareness Training in Mogadishu. Photo by Ilyas Ahmed, AMISOM.

Future research should examine how gender intersects with other intersectional factors such as age, disability, geography, education, and professional background to identify additional barriers to inclusive representation. This intersectional analysis is essential for developing distinct approaches that address the complex nature of representation challenges. Understanding these intersections would enable more targeted interventions to tackle the specific needs of diverse gender groups.

At the national level, Member States should review and reform institutional procedures for appointing focal points to ensure transparent, inclusive, and merit-based selection processes, while improving gender parity. Such reforms are critical for dismantling systemic barriers perpetuating gender imbalances in international environmental governance. This might involve broadening cosultation processes, establishing diverse

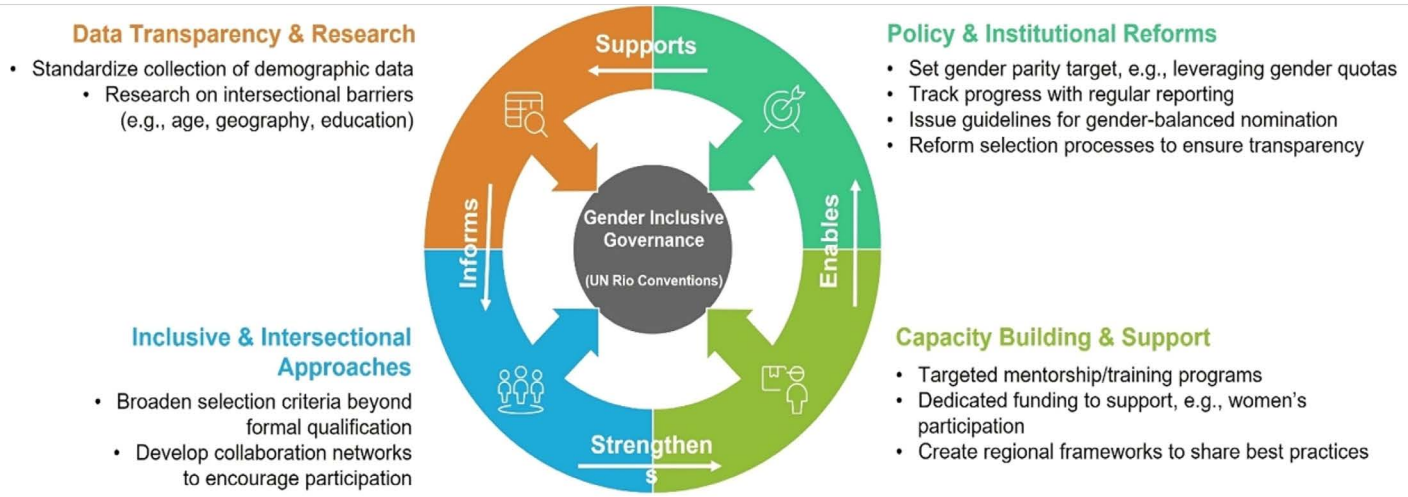


Figure 4: *Strategies towards gender-inclusive representation in UN Rio Convention*

selection committees, implementing bias-aware recruitment practices, and looking beyond strictly academic or formal qualifications to integrate the value of relevant lived experiences and Indigenous knowledge. Additionally, integrating gender perspectives into environmental programming, conducting evidence-based analyses of gender roles, and incorporating gender criteria into climate and environmental finance mechanisms can address disparities and enhance sustainability.[27]

Developing programs for women's participation and collaboration in environmental policymaking, leveraging the Women in Water Diplomacy Network[28] example, is advised. This represents a practical model for empowering women in environmental diplomacy and could inspire similar initiatives across other areas of environmental policy.

Conventions should standardize the collection and publication of demographic data on focal points and delegates, including all genders and, where feasible, other intersectional factors (e.g., differently abled individuals), to facilitate ongoing monitoring of representation patterns. Improved data collection would enable more rigorous assessment of progress toward gender parity goals and inform evidence-based policy interventions. Transparency in reporting would also create pressure for improvement, highlighting both progress and persistent gaps. By implementing these recommendations, the international community can make significant progress toward achieving gender parity in environmental governance structures, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and legitimacy of global environmental cooperation.

In sum, to strengthen global environmental governance, this UNU-INWEH report advocates for achieving gender parity targets in the UN Rio conventions through capacity-building initiatives like mentorship programs, financial resource allocation, and inclusive nomination procedures that address biases and ensure equitable leadership. It is essential to recognize that diversity and inclusivity extend beyond gender, encompassing other social factors, such as disability. While empowering women is crucial, reducing inclusivity to gender alone is misleading and counterproductive. Finally, progress should be measured through intersectional data collection and monitored via standardized frameworks in collaboration with organizations such as UN Women.

Overall, this report highlights that **the gender representation gap among the governmental focal points of the UN Rio Conventions is acute, threatening global environmental governance**. Achieving gender parity is not merely about numerical representation but ensuring that diverse perspectives inform policy development and implementation. To address today's environmental crises, inclusive governance must move from **aspiration to action, starting with gender parity** at the highest levels of environmental decision-making. By dismantling structural barriers and prioritizing inclusive representation across all genders and marginalized communities, UN conventions can lead the way in crafting equitable, effective policies that safeguard the planet for all.

Open Research

Data on national focal points were collected from the official websites of UNFCCC, UNCCD, and CBD. Regional classifications follow the system that the UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management uses.

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