

# Climate action in China

Four levers to advance gender  
and social equality

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**Summary of research findings**

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# Summary

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- China is highly vulnerable to climate change risks, including storm surges, urban waterlogging and agricultural droughts. The country has a key role to play in global climate action – for which, effective delivery on national targets for carbon peaking by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060 will be essential. Simultaneously, China is pursuing innovative low-carbon development, the revitalization of rural areas and the promotion of women’s development.
- Gender and social inequalities affect the ability of people to participate in decision-making and access land, finance, technology and services key for climate resilience. Consequently, the adverse impacts of climate change disproportionately affect disadvantaged social groups, including women and girls, low-income communities and people with disabilities. In China, these people may be more vulnerable if located in remote rural areas, or in urban areas without a ‘hukou’ or household registration permit.
- Climate change interventions that address gender and other social inequalities can produce more effective and sustainable outcomes – as measures that improve the capacity of disadvantaged groups to adapt to climate change impacts also enhance the capacity of the whole community. Evidence also demonstrates that women’s participation in climate change decision-making produces more effective environmental outcomes and a fairer distribution of resources.
- China’s current approach to climate change and socio-economic policy is relatively siloed, top-down and technocratic, which typically precludes the consideration of inclusive approaches to climate action that support women’s development. This poses the risk of implementing climate change measures that inadvertently worsen social inequalities.
- However, key synergies exist between work on women’s development, rural revitalization and climate change mitigation and adaptation in China. For example, initiatives that support low-income rural women farmers to develop sustainable, secure livelihoods through access to education and technology support women’s development, as well as community-level climate resilience and poverty reduction. The transition away from fossil fuels to sustainable energy has the potential to create a net increase in jobs in China – providing an opportunity to promote diversity in the energy sector, while ensuring a just transition<sup>1</sup> for the most affected workers and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Just transition measures ensure that society as a whole benefits from the shift to a low-carbon economy, while supporting those most adversely affected by the transition.

By leveraging the synergies between these policy areas, China can accelerate progress on its national climate goals while promoting ‘common prosperity’, sustainable growth and women’s development.

- While collaboration among researchers and practitioners working in China on climate action, rural development, women’s development and social inclusion is relatively limited, there is a growing interest in interdisciplinary exchange. There is a nascent interdisciplinary ‘community of practice’<sup>2</sup> on gender and inclusion in climate action in China, with international ties, which could build a strong evidence base to support cross-sectoral policy dialogue, public awareness and the development of inclusive climate programmes.
- To advance gender equality and social inclusion in climate action in China, this paper proposes four levers for change:
  1. Collecting sex-, age- and diversity-disaggregated data and conducting interdisciplinary qualitative research on the root causes of different social groups’ vulnerability to direct and systemic climate change impacts.
  2. Combining climate change, rural revitalization and women’s development research agendas, through building an interdisciplinary community of practice.
  3. Increasing interdisciplinary and international collaboration on gender-transformative climate change programmes.<sup>3</sup>
  4. Enhancing funding support available for cross-cutting inclusive approaches to climate action in China.

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<sup>2</sup> The most common definition of ‘communities of practice’ is ‘groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’. Wenger, E. (1998), *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932>.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Gender-transformative’ describes laws, policies and programmes that consider and address the causes of gender-based inequalities, to change harmful gender norms, roles and power relations to promote gender equality and women’s development.

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# Recommendations

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This research was informed by interviews, questionnaires and workshops with representatives from academic institutions, government and non-government think-tanks, domestic and international NGOs, and funding organizations working on climate action, poverty alleviation, sustainable development and gender equality in China. Participants were from organizations based in mainland China, Hong Kong special administrative region (SAR), and internationally. Efforts were made to ensure geographical diversity within mainland China, and the diversity of participants by gender, age and discipline of research and/or practice. A confidential questionnaire with 37 participants and 20 confidential semi-structured interviews explored China's policy environment and intersectoral exchange and collaboration on inclusive climate action. The questionnaire and interviews were used to identify a set of shared challenges and opportunities for furthering gender and inclusion in climate action in China, and draft levers for change. These challenges, opportunities and draft levers for change were discussed in two closed-door online workshops with 40 participants in April 2022, comprised of similar institutional affiliations to interview and questionnaire respondents. The levers for change were revised based on workshop discussion and feedback from participants.

Based on participatory processes, this research proposes four levers to foster more inclusive and gender-transformative climate action in China. Researchers, NGO practitioners and funders in the fields of climate action, poverty alleviation and women's development in China – based internationally, in Hong Kong SAR or mainland China – can consider the following actions:

## Data collection

### Researchers and practitioners:

- Increase collection of sex-, age- and diversity-disaggregated environmental data, and conduct research – especially interdisciplinary qualitative research – on the differential impacts of climate change and the low-carbon transition. This evidence base can help to design targeted interventions for equitable socio-economic and climate outcomes in diverse Chinese contexts while preparing for future climate impacts. It can also demonstrate the value of gender-transformative adaptation measures to policymakers and the public.

## **An interdisciplinary community of practice on gender and inclusion in climate action**

### **Researchers and practitioners:**

- Combining climate change, rural revitalization and women’s development research agendas – through building an interdisciplinary community of practice via policy and academic networks – can help to identify cross-cutting solutions to environmental and social issues. For example, gender-transformative interventions that improve women’s access to and control over land, education and credit, and address unequal gender norms, can support women’s climate change resilience and bring social and environmental co-benefits. Such a network can also support entrepreneurs on gender and inclusion to advance the uptake of inclusive approaches in their environment and development organizations.
- Developing a community of practice may require experts and practitioners to undertake additional capacity-building to integrate gender and inclusion in environmental research and programmes, and vice versa. Rural revitalization and poverty reduction experts can share knowledge on integrating environmental and gender equality considerations into holistic solutions.

### **Funders:**

- A gap in resources exists for capacity-building workshops on gender and inclusion in climate action, and for developing a combined research agenda on gender-transformative climate action in China – for example, on strengthening the climate resilience of education and healthcare systems in ways that improve access for disadvantaged social groups. Supporting the development of a community of practice on gender and inclusion in climate action in China can accelerate the development of innovative research and practice, with benefits for public participation in climate action and inclusive policy implementation.

## **Interdisciplinary and international collaboration on gender-transformative programmes**

### **Researchers and practitioners:**

- Interdisciplinary and international collaboration on gender-transformative climate change programmes can foster innovation and harness synergies between gender equality and climate action. Key areas for such collaborations include programmes to ensure that all people – including low-income, rural and rural-to-urban migrant women – have opportunities to access ‘green jobs’ in a just transition.
- Share case studies of gender-transformative programmes in diverse Chinese contexts with funders and policymakers, as they can help to demonstrate the co-benefits of inclusive approaches to climate action and identify successful interdisciplinary approaches that could be scaled up through cross-sector policy measures. It may be helpful to consider their potential contributions

to national policy goals such as ‘common prosperity’, building an ‘ecological civilization’ and meeting China’s 2030 and 2060 climate goals. Disseminating these case studies more widely can also help to build public awareness.

## **Funding for cross-cutting approaches**

### **Researchers and practitioners:**

- Consider cross-cutting approaches to climate action as an opportunity to innovate and attract international funding – for example, through engaging with funding organizations to understand their priorities on gender and inclusion and exploring interdisciplinary collaboration in funding bids. Capacity-building on gender mainstreaming in project planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation may be required if funders implement more comprehensive gender and inclusion requirements.

### **Funders:**

- Building internal capacity for gender mainstreaming and the synergies between gender and social equality, socio-economic development and climate action can help funding organizations to understand the co-benefits of gender-transformative and cross-cutting approaches to environment-related funding. An increased evidence base of cross-cutting inclusive climate and development programmes can help changemakers in funding organizations to ‘make the case’ internally for these approaches.
- Supporting inclusive approaches to climate action offers an opportunity for impact and innovation in China. Funders can bring together coalitions of partners from a range of disciplines to work on cross-cutting programmes – providing strategic direction, while grantees implement work according to their expertise.
- Of the estimated \$15 trillion in investments needed for China to keep its emissions compatible with a 2°C global temperature rise (even more for 1.5°C), increasing the proportion of climate change funding earmarked as gender-transformative, or for which gender is a priority, would make a marked difference.<sup>4</sup> Requiring gender and social considerations in project planning, budgeting, monitoring, evaluation and reporting can support their adoption among climate change and rural revitalization researchers and practitioners. However, as systemic change takes a relatively long time, funders and grantees need to be aligned on the timeline and expectations. Openness to a range of qualitative and quantitative indicators on gender and inclusion in climate action can support the implementation of more innovative approaches.

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<sup>4</sup> Myllyvirta, L. (2020), ‘Influential academics reveal how China can achieve its ‘carbon neutrality’ goal’, *Carbon Brief*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/influential-academics-reveal-how-china-can-achieve-its-carbon-neutrality-goal>.

Through exchange and collaboration, researchers and practitioners in climate action, rural revitalization and women's development in China can build a strong evidence base on gender and inclusion in climate change mitigation and adaptation.

For a wider impact, sharing the results of this research and practice with both policymakers and the public is crucial. Sharing evidence from diverse Chinese contexts and multi-stakeholder dialogues can support capacity-building on this topic for central and subnational level officials. This can contribute to cross-cutting policymaking and implementation, and potentially funding for more holistic approaches to climate action. Public engagement and outreach through conventional and social media can build public understanding of the differential impacts of climate change and the benefits of inclusive climate solutions. It could help to boost participatory community solutions to climate change, rural revitalization and women's development.

Ultimately, these approaches can accelerate action on China's 2030 carbon peaking and 2060 carbon neutrality goals, while contributing to gender equality in the pursuit of a just transition, 'common prosperity' and 'ecological civilization'.

### Case study: Strengthening women farmers' income security and climate resilience in Qinghai province

In 2015, Qinghai province was one of the last pockets of extreme poverty in China and was experiencing climate impacts that affected the security of agricultural livelihoods.<sup>5</sup> From 2015 to 2020, the Strengthening Qinghai Women Farmers' Income Security and Resilience in a Changing Climate project (led by UN Women in coalition with diverse domestic and international organizations) worked with over 69,000 women farmers to adapt to climate risks by addressing some of the root causes of their vulnerability.<sup>6</sup>

The project supported Guanglin Cooperative to diversify their crops and livestock, reduce waste and integrate more deeply into local economies despite pandemic-related transport disruptions. This supported community food security during the pandemic, increased the climate resilience of their livelihoods and boosted their incomes by 60 per cent within one year.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the project targeted barriers to women's entrepreneurship by facilitating participants' access to information, technology and finance, and addressing entrenched gender norms – ultimately enabling 75 per cent of female participants in entrepreneurship training to establish their own businesses.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> UN Women Asia and the Pacific (2021), 'Three years on: Rural women in Qinghai lead from the front as a climate-resilience program winds down in China', <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/10/three-years-on>; IFAD (2022), 'IFAD and UN Women join hands for rural women's empowerment in China', <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/latest/-/ifad-and-un-women-join-hands-for-rural-women-s-empowerment-in-china>.

<sup>6</sup> UN Women Asia and the Pacific (2021), 'Three years on: Rural women in Qinghai lead from the front as a climate-resilience program winds down in China'.

<sup>7</sup> UN Women Asia and the Pacific (2020), 'From flood victims to frontline responders: One women-owned cooperative steps up in rural China', <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/01/from-flood-victims-to-frontline-responders>.

<sup>8</sup> IFAD (2022), 'IFAD and UN Women join hands for rural women's empowerment in China'.

By addressing the gender division of labour and women's financial independence, the project contributed to shifting social norms. Some participants reported more confidence and increased participation in local affairs.<sup>9</sup> Changing gender and social norms takes time and may require other gender-transformative measures, such as balancing the distribution of unpaid household labour, to ensure women are not overburdened with additional responsibilities.

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<sup>9</sup> UN Women (2020), 'Roses in the battlefield: rural women farmers join the fight against COVID-19 in China', <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/04/feature-rural-women-farmers-join-the-fight-against-covid-19-in-china>; UN Women Asia and the Pacific (2020), 'From flood victims to frontline responders: One women-owned cooperative steps up in rural China'.



## About the author

**Nina Jeffs** is an Academy associate in the Environment and Society Programme at Chatham House, where she provides analysis on climate change policies with a focus on social and gender equality. She also researches international climate politics and the relationships between sustainable development, inequality and climate change. Nina is currently Women4Climate programme manager at C40 Cities Leadership Group. Nina has worked on the intersection of climate change and gender and social equality in grassroots organizations as well as at UN Women and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. She received a BA (Hons) in human, social and political sciences from the University of Cambridge as a Girlders' Scholar, and an MSc in global affairs from Tsinghua University, Beijing, as a Schwarzman Scholar.

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