Climate inaction is a threat to women’s rights - but in the EU, women are leading the charge to change this

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Antidemocratic ideas threaten women’s rights - and the planet

In the run-up to the EU elections this 6-9 June, a rise in support for antidemocratic movements is taking place across Europe.

Evidence shows that antidemocratic ideas pose a risk to women’s rights and priorities including on the fight against worsening climate change and the protection of nature. Women’s rights are already under attack and they are suffering in areas where parties with anti-democratic ideas have seized power, including on abortion and the prevention of violence against women.

At the same time, studies show women care more about climate and environment issues, but anti-democratic parties are increasingly blocking policies on climate action and the protection of nature.

Threats to climate action: A women’s rights issue

Climate change affects women more than men. Women suffer from higher mortality during heat waves than men, heat waves impact pregnancy and newborn babies. Women are also more likely to have jobs with a greater exposure to climate impacts for example in commerce, tourism and care work. This means the climate crisis puts in jeopardy not only the health of women, but also their livelihoods.
Statistics show that climate and social issues matter more to women – but these are not the core concerns of antidemocratic parties. Women in the EU are also more likely than men to consider action against climate change (28% vs 26%), the fight against poverty and social exclusion (36% vs 30%) and public health (35% vs 28%) as a policy priority issue. The Robert Schuman Foundation found that men are more likely to vote for parties with policies that are “particularly hostile to women’s rights”, including on abortion rights and on violence against women.

This gap between the reality of women’s interests and needs, and the priorities of an increasingly conservative, antidemocratic trend, creates a system with a higher risk of enacting policies that jeopardise the wellbeing of the 384 million women in Europe.

### How women are more vulnerable to climate change

- In the summer of 2022, 63% of heat-linked deaths were women across Europe.
- Several studies from Spain (the country with the second highest number of heat-attributable summer deaths in Europe in 2022), including some regional studies in Galicia, northern Spain, Madrid and Barcelona, confirmed women are more vulnerable to heat sickness and death than men.
- Extreme temperatures put pregnant women at high risk of heatstroke and can cause pregnancy complications and health issues for newborns. Exposure to extreme heat during pregnancy has been linked to a 27% increase in stillbirth, preterm birth and other complications during labour and delivery.
- Climate impacts are not just an increased health risk for women - but also put their livelihoods and that of their families at risk.
- Women tend to work in more precarious sectors than men, such as commerce, tourism and care work, which may all be hit by climate change.
- In Madrid, households financially reliant on women are 32% more vulnerable to energy poverty, rising to 45% for women over the age of 65 and 51% for single mothers. This makes women-headed households more vulnerable to the extreme heatwaves and climate change.

### Women more concerned about climate change, and more willing to act, than men

Anti-democratic and right-leaning parties are increasingly abandoning, or even attacking, progressive climate policies, which disproportionately impacts women’s priorities. In 2023, a Euronews poll found women were more likely to say the fight against climate change was a priority compared to men (55% vs 49%).

A separate analysis of more than 44,000 people concluded that women report greater concern about climate change than men, while an IMF survey of 28 countries found that women are more concerned about climate change and report a higher personal willingness to change their behaviour. Moreover, a European Social Survey found 63% of women agreed that limiting their energy use reduces greenhouse gas emissions, compared to just 36% of men.
This pattern is repeated when it comes to protecting the environment: More women than men agree it is important to care for nature and the environment.

**Women are also more likely to act more to tackle climate change than men.** The Women’s Forum barometer on gender equity, found that women do more recycling, buying local, and reducing water and meat consumption. Women are also more motivated than men to lower their carbon emissions to benefit the planet, health and for future generations, while they also reported stronger environmental attitudes and behaviours.

Research has also found that women tend to be more altruistic than men. They are more willing to wait for results and they care about the consequences of their actions over a longer time frame. In Sweden, a study found that women were more supportive of costly climate mitigation policies when they had been informed of the intergenerational impacts, while men were not.

**The impact across the political spectrum can endanger women**

The rise of antidemocratic movements across Europe is also influencing the moderate political right: some parties are increasingly adopting more antidemocratic ideas that are rolling-back on climate action.

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**Case study: A new law to protect nature**

The EU is on the verge of adopting a progressive new law designed to restore and protect nature, including forests, oceans and vital habitats for pollinators. The law will also boost Europe’s ability to withstand increasingly extreme weather conditions as the planet continues to heat up.

However, the proposed law was subjected to conservative and antidemocratic pushbacks that resulted in it being drastically watered down. The nature restoration law has still not been agreed as some EU countries withheld their support at the last minute – its fate still hangs in the balance.

This scaling back of climate measures and ambition is also having a direct impact on women to the extent that some are being threatened for taking action in support of the climate. In Germany, for example, climate activists – mostly young women – have been subject to abuse. Prominent and popular international figures have also spread misinformation about female climate activists.

On the flip side, women who feel threatened by the far right can become more involved in politics if they still believe in democracy.

**Women are voting**

Female support for democratic ideas will boost women’s rights and could stop the scaling back of climate and nature policies. Positively, statistics show the gender gap in voting is
diminishing. In Germany, for example, it has shrunk from 3% in 1953 to 1% in the most recent national elections. And, in the upcoming EU elections, 72% of women intend to vote, compared to 70% of men. In the 2023 Polish elections, 74.7% of women voted, compared to 73.1% of men – this helped prevent a populist, anti-abortion government from taking power.

However, 60% of women are more likely to cite practical or personal reasons preventing them from voting, compared to 54% of men, and a post 2019 EU elections survey found that women still feel less involved in European politics than men due to lower perceived levels of knowledge about the EU parliament and elections.

**Female decision-makers and business leaders are good for climate and nature**

While female support is vital to pushing ahead with climate action and the protection of nature, female participation in politics is also key to driving change.

- Higher rates of women’s representation in national parliaments leads to stronger climate change policies, and lower carbon dioxide emissions.
- A 1% increase in female politicians increases a country’s Climate Laws, Institutions and Measures Index by 0.003% on a scale that ranges from 0 to 1.
- A one-unit increase on the Women’s Political Empowerment Index leads to an 11.5% decrease in the country’s carbon emissions.
- A 1% increase in female politicians led to an average 0.22% increase in protected areas across 90 countries.
- Countries with a higher proportion of women in parliament are more likely to ratify environmental treaties.

More women in parliament also increases renewable energy consumption in both high- and middle-income democracies. While, more female than male candidates running for national parliamentary elections agree on the need to take measures on the environment. Among candidates, 83% of women believed that stronger measures should be taken to protect the environment, compared to 75% of men. The difference between men and women is significant even when age, ideology, education, religion, occupation and number of children, are taken into account.

The good news is that women’s representation is on the rise in European politics. In the upcoming 2024 EU elections, 4 out of 10 of the lead candidates nominated by Europe’s main political parties are female. This compares to no female lead candidates in both the 2019 and 2014 EU elections. In 2024, Ursula von der Leyen is the first female individual lead candidate ever nominated.

In the European Parliament, the percentage of female MEPs reached an all-time high of 41% following the 2019 election, up from just 16.6% in 1979. Today, 39.6% of MEPs are women – above the world average of 26.9% for national parliaments (33.2% in Europe). Half of all EU countries have gender quotas for European election candidates or government representation, however in Germany, where there are no quotas, only 34% of EU election candidates are women.

**Strong track record in business**

When it comes to business, female leaders are more likely to make climate-friendly decisions, without affecting profitability. An analysis of 1,500 companies found that
women on the board of directors meant the company is more likely to invest in renewable power and to measure and reduce carbon emissions.

Moreover, firms with three or more female directors perform better on environmental and sustainable criteria, and more women in managerial positions is associated with better environmental performance. Data also shows that the 20 most gender diverse utilities outperform the less diverse ones, and utility boards with at least 30% women have higher profits.

**The power of female support to stand up for climate and women’s rights**

The same type of antidemocratic parties that are obstructing climate action are also threatening women’s rights on important issues like access to abortion and protection against gender-based violence.

By harnessing the collective power of women’s voices, we can push for policies that not only safeguard women’s rights but also address the urgent issues of our time, including the climate crisis, for all. This shift could lead to significant positive benefits, promoting social equity, economic stability, and environmental sustainability, ultimately creating a healthier, more resilient future for both people and the planet.

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**About SHE Changes Climate**

*SHE Changes Climate* is working towards an equitable future for all by addressing gender gaps within global climate leadership, and campaigning for more inclusive and diverse perspectives in climate decision-making processes.