

# Three key findings on girls' activism and leadership in Asia and the Pacific



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## SEI policy brief May 2023

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## Key messages

- In Asia and the Pacific, girls and young women have successfully advocated and led in the climate change and environmental movements while addressing social injustices, both through regional and international mobilizations and at the local level on an everyday basis.
- Structural barriers persist that challenge girls and young women as advocates and leaders. They are embedded in policy mechanisms, civic spaces and societal norms.
- These barriers create the risk of “youthwashing” climate action, as well as put the physical and mental well-being of girls and young women at risk, while intensifying the challenges advocates face when balancing conflicting priorities.
- Climate change and environmental decision-makers and youth representatives in decision-making spaces must work together to amplify the voices of girls and women in Asia and the Pacific, tackle the barriers they face, and create an enabling environment for their meaningful engagement.

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Around the world, young people are raising their voices and taking actions in response to the climate crisis and calling for climate justice. The youth-led climate movement has seen active engagement of girls and young women, both as participants and leaders.

Less recognition is given to the persistent efforts of girls and young women in countries in Asia and the Pacific, a region where climate justice and action are critical due to a variety of intersecting factors.

This policy brief discusses the ways in which girls and young women advocate for climate justice, barriers to their work, and the shrinking civic space in which they act. The discussion here draws on evidence from recent [research conducted by SEI and Plan International in Asia and the Pacific](#), which included a regional policy analysis, social listening, and an online survey, complemented by three in-depth case studies in Indonesia, Nepal and the Solomon Islands (Tran et al., 2023). This work allowed us to make recommendations for policies to amplify the power of girls and young women as climate justice advocates, particularly from Asia and the Pacific.

IMAGE (ABOVE): Volunteers are working together to conserve the planet with coastal garbage collection, Thailand © PIPAT WONGSAWANG / GETTY

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## Three key findings on girls and young women in climate activism and advocacy in the region

Below are three key points on the multifaceted nature of girls' and young women's leadership, the challenges that hinder their movements, and the risks they face.

### 1. Girls and young women advocate for climate justice on multiple levels and in diverse ways.

Young female advocates represent diverse social groups in the region. Our survey of 218 girls and young women (aged between 18 and 34) who identify as climate justice advocates found over 40% belong to an Indigenous group or an ethnic minority and 40% live in non-urban areas.

Intergenerational and gender justice are at the heart of their advocacy efforts. They often work with marginalized communities, such as people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, Indigenous People, or LGBTQ+ groups, to tackle the interwoven links between climate change and human trafficking, gender inequality, and Indigenous communities defending their land, among other social issues.

Girls and young women's strategies are multifaceted. They may act every day or occasionally, with both law abiding and disruptive activities. They lead climate action and advance climate justice by

- doing: taking hands-on action in their homes, schools and communities
- sharing: using creative, mainstream and online approaches to raise awareness of climate issues and solutions
- connecting: networking and holding dialogues with decision makers, community leaders, and other civil society actors
- demanding: taking legal actions, joining protests and strikes, and organizing or mobilizing to seek ambitious policy changes.

Social media and online platforms are both a tool for and a form of advocacy. They are used for raising awareness, accessing information, communicating within teams, and direct advocacy. Social media platforms allow many girls and young women to engage in climate advocacy, activism and action, daily and with ease.

However, girls and young women recognize the challenges and limitations of social media, including cybersecurity, online abuse and misinformation, as well as issues around accessibility and the importance of in-person engagement. A social listening exercise found that online attention to girls' and young women's voices peaks only during high-profile events such as the Conferences of Parties (COPs) to major UN meetings and is often short-lived.

### 2. Structural and societal barriers hinder girls' and young women's advocacy.

In Asia and the Pacific, structural barriers exist that prevent girls and young women from being heard and taken seriously in their climate advocacy and action. This includes a shrinking civic space and a lack of official mechanisms that facilitate their civic engagement in many countries, as well as norms and discrimination based on age and gender, challenges in access due to geography, and and misrepresentation (Table 1).

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Close to 60% of the girls and young women surveyed identify gender equality, social justice and human rights as the focus of their advocacy.

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Over 90% of girls and young women surveyed use social media in their activism and advocacy.

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A third of the girls and young women surveyed think they are not taken seriously in decision-making processes within their groups and activities.

**Table 1. Barriers facing girls and young women as climate advocates in Asia and the Pacific**

<b>Limited civic spaces and policy mechanisms</b>	The civic space in most countries of the region is rated as narrowed, obstructed or repressed, with more countries experiencing a shrinking civic space than an expanding one in recent years (CIVICUS Monitor, n.d.). Climate change-related policies have limited provisions to facilitate girls' and young women's engagement in climate action and decision-making. Gaps also remain between policy and implementation.
<b>Gender norms</b>	In many countries, strict norms pose challenges to girls and young women participating in advocacy. They are often restricted in the way they dress, move around, talk and act, while having fewer opportunities and less access to education and resources. It is difficult for girls and young women to speak up, take action and fulfil leadership roles in many cultures in the region.
<b>Age norms</b>	Young people's credibility can also be questioned because of their age. Many people believe youths' place in society is at school or in the home. A third of survey respondents indicated they are consulted but have limited influence over decision-making within the groups or movements in which they are involved.
<b>Misrepresentation</b>	Girls and young women in countries of the global South are often misrepresented, lack representation, or experience greater power imbalances compared to those in the global North. Furthermore, images of "girl power" or "individual heroes" are often used in media coverage of girls in activism, shifting the focus away from their calls for collective action that might challenge the root causes of inequality.
<b>Geography</b>	Girls and young women in remote, rural or small island areas may have less access to information, technology, networks and other resources than others. This limits their abilities to connect with peers and other actors and makes their engagement more challenging as social media and digital technologies become an increasingly integral part of the daily life of many people.

### 3. A shrinking civic space brings risks to girls and young women and the climate movement.

“When I am invited to speak, am I really invited to share my opinions or is it for show?” – an Indonesian interviewee.

The barriers above limit the abilities of girls and young women to participate in climate activism, sustain their engagement over the long term, and access financial and other resources for their initiatives. They also lead girls and young women to feel used in “youthwashing”: similar to “greenwashing”, their energy and the hope that youth inspire are captured by other interests to make unproductive efforts seem legitimate. The barriers also lead to negative impacts on girl and young women activists' health and well-being, and difficulties in balancing conflicting priorities (Table 2).

**Table 2. Risks experienced by girls and young women as climate advocates**

<b>"Youthwashing"</b>	<b>Health, well-being and security</b>	<b>Conflicting priorities</b>
Adults may engage girls and young women at a superficial, tokenistic level. This is also known as youthwashing, when young advocates are invited to a seat at the table as a demonstration of inclusion, but no meaningful action or real commitment to change by adults follows.	Advocates fear the threat of getting arrested, physical attacks, online abuse, cyberbullying, and being reported to their schools or parents. Involvement in activism and advocacy can be mentally exhausting. In addition, climate anxiety, stemming from the threats of climate change, negativity of the media, and disappointment in adults' and leaders' inaction and empty promises, can lead to negative outcomes.	Since many girls and young women in climate activism are students or employed, engaging in action means they must effectively manage their own time and balance advocacy commitments with other priorities. This involves making trade-offs and compromises, as well as finding ways to align these commitments. Such challenges become harder to overcome when they do not receive support from family, school and society.

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## Conclusion and policy recommendations

In Asia and the Pacific, girls and young women who are advocates for climate justice are motivated by their personal lived experiences of climate change impacts and social inequality. They report that their own experiences inspired them to take leadership roles and to persist in the face of criticism and a perceived lack of support.

Many girls and young women surveyed and interviewed in this study pointed to the importance of alliances and support from diverse stakeholders in their societies for their engagement in the climate movement. They feel empowered and encouraged when working with female leaders and politicians, as well as with supportive allies, including boys and men.

Recognizing, empowering and responding to the voices and actions of girls and young women is a matter of respecting and fulfilling their human rights and the rights of a child, as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It also helps to speed up societal responses to the global crisis, keep those in power accountable, and inspire innovation and creativity.

By addressing the barriers and risks facing girls and young women engaging in climate action and advocacy the Asia-Pacific region, policymakers, institutions and other actors in the climate change sector can create an enabling, supportive and safe environment where girls and young women can advance their activities and contribute to a sustainable, just future for all: the following recommendations are for international and regional policymakers and actors, and youth representatives.

Recommendations for international and regional policies and decision-makers, including the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on Climate Change and Human Rights and ASEAN's Regional Framework on Environmental Rights:

- **Reinforce the rights of girls and young women to participate in decision-making processes** related to climate change and ask duty bearers to institutionalize youth-engagement mechanisms in their climate and environmental decision-making processes at different levels of government and ensure that these mechanisms are inclusive with appropriate accountability measures.
- **Reinforce the rights of girls and young women to be heard and to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly**, and ask duty bearers to protect their rights by enabling a safe civic space, including online spaces, for children to express their opinions on climate and environmental matters.
- **Call attention to unique barriers that challenge the achievement of the rights of girls and young women**, especially their rights to participation in decision-making processes and their rights to a clean, safe, healthy and sustainable environment. These include gender norms and discrimination that limit their access to information, resources, and participation opportunities.

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Recommendations for youth representatives in decision-making processes, including the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, the Official Youth Constituency of the UNFCCC (YOUNGO) and the UN Youth Envoy:

- **Connect with and amplify the voices and lived experiences of girl and young woman advocates at the grassroots level in Asia and the Pacific on climate (in)justices**, many of whom may not have access to formal decision-making spaces at the international level. This could be done, for example, through the creation of regional youth networks that facilitate a safe and empowering space for girls and young women to share experiences, knowledge and best practices. Such a platform should recognize and address the accessibility challenges facing girls and young women in remote, rural areas or small islands, such as through local chapters with regional representatives.
- **Advocate for accessible funding that supports mobilizations and climate actions led by children and youth at the grassroots level**, particularly for girls and young women in the contexts most vulnerable to climate change, including in Asia and the Pacific.
- **Advocate for meaningful engagement of girls and young women in decision making** by working with other UN bodies and stakeholders to ensure that youth voices from all regions, including Asia and the Pacific, are not only heard but taken seriously and acted upon. This includes enduring recognition of the everyday, grassroots initiatives of girls and young women (not just during short windows of high-level events), effective accountability monitoring and awareness-raising of youth-washing (i.e., tokenistic approaches to youth inclusion without meaningful engagement).
- **Advance awareness and recognition among other UN bodies and stakeholders of climate anxiety**, and advocate for investments in initiatives that tackle climate anxiety, including for youth advocates.
- **Advance awareness and recognition among other UN bodies and stakeholders of risks associated with girls' and young women's engagement in climate advocacy and action**, including risks to mental well-being, physical safety, and cyber security, and advocate for the development of safeguarding measures and investment in initiatives that mitigate and address such risks.

Recommendations for the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) Hub and the action plan under the Glasgow work programme on ACE:

- **Include capacity-building activities that strengthen governments' and other stakeholders' capacities to work with girls and young women** in ways that respect, protect and fulfil their rights and that recognize their unique capacities and the challenges they face in Asia and the Pacific.
- **Assure the accessibility of climate policies and related materials**, including translation in local languages, production in user-friendly accessible formats, the adoption of age-appropriate language, and provision of access to girls and young women in remote, rural and small island communities in Asia and the Pacific to keep youth informed of the progress of ACE activities and enable their participation in actions for climate empowerment.

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### Published by

Stockholm Environment Institute  
Linnégatan 87D, Box 24218  
104 51 Stockholm, Sweden  
Tel: +46 8 30 80 44

### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.51414/sei2023.031>

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