

Which Advocacy Strategies are Most Effective? Examining the Women and Gender  
Constituency at the May 2017 Bonn Climate Conference

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## **Abstract**

Women's rights are a crucial aspect of environmental rights because women, particularly those in the developing world, are disproportionately harmed by climate change (Alston 2013; Dankelman 2010; Women Watch n.d.). In response to this problem, women's environmental rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to advocate for greater gender-responsive solutions to climate change in various domestic and international domains. One arena where these NGOs are particularly active is in the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). However, little is known about the effectiveness of WGC advocacy strategies. My research examines the different advocacy strategies used by the WGC at the May 2017 Bonn Climate Conference, analyzes their effectiveness and provides suggestions for furthering WGC advocacy. Through these observations and interviews with key constituency members, it becomes clear that the most effective strategies of the WGC are cultivating personal relationships, belonging to a transnational advocacy network (TAN), and fighting for gender-inclusive language in UNFCCC documents.

## Introduction

Women's rights are a crucial aspect of environmental rights. Women in the developing world are disproportionately affected by climate change because they depend on natural resources to provide for themselves and their families, and climate change makes accessing these resources more difficult (Women Watch, n.d.). Women also often provide unique solutions to climate change because they have different perspectives than their male counterparts (Ciplet 2014). Flynn Coleman argues that "enhancing women's roles in environmental policymaking and granting them greater land rights" will benefit the environment as a whole through "utilizing local women's strengths" and knowledge of the land (2008, 181, 199). Because of the disproportionate effect climate change has on women, and the positive roles that women's perspectives can play in mitigating climate change, women's environmental groups have formed and are advocating for solutions to climate change.

However, women's environmental rights groups do not advocate within a vacuum. Women's environmental rights groups are a part of the transnational climate protection movement (CPM). According to Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, transnational advocacy networks (TANs) include various members such as individuals, states, domestic and international non-governmental organizations (I/NGOs) and international organizations (IOs), and these groups work together to promote new norms and support domestic grassroots efforts to adopt such norms (1999).

This research focuses on international NGO climate advocacy at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meetings because the UNFCCC is the largest arena

for international climate discourse that involves both state and non-state participants, which are respectively known as Party and non-Party stakeholders. Within the UNFCCC there are different constituencies; one such group is the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC), which focuses on women's environmental rights (Women and Gender Constituency, n.d.). My research examines what strategies the WGC uses, why they employ those strategies, and the effectiveness of their strategies.

My goal is to uncover the influence that women's environmental rights NGOs play in the CPM at UN climate negotiations. For the purposes of this research, influence is defined as gaining visibility as a constituency and attaining consistent recognition of gender-responsive/gender-just climate responses at UNFCCC meetings, sessions, and side events. Greater visibility converts into influence because it allows the WGC to gain members and allies, which further contributes to the ability of the WGC to achieve its goals. This research also considers venues at the UNFCCC where women's environmental NGOs are and are not effectively achieving their goals. By establishing these two things, I hope to be able to determine the best strategies that CPM groups can more effectively lobby for better environmental policies. This information could potentially be used by women's environmental NGOs to achieve success in their advocacy efforts.

As all activists do, the WGC uses multiple, varied strategies in different situations. However, personal relationships developed between constituency members and UNFCCC officials, Party members, and other non-Party stakeholders are the best way to affect change, especially when combined with funding opportunities, TAN membership, and the inclusion of

formal language related to gender within UNFCCC documents.<sup>1</sup> Enhancing all of these things will further the effectiveness of the WGC at future UN climate negotiations.

This paper begins by providing background information on the effects climate change has on women, the UNFCCC and the WGC, and rival TANS. Next, it discusses three arguments about how NGOs gain influence within international organizations (IOs). It then analyzes WGC advocacy strategies, and closes by discussing where the WGC could more effectively advocate for gender-just solutions to climate change.

## **Literature Review**

### **Women and Climate Change**

Climate change has detrimental effects for the environment and people all over the world. Women's rights are a crucial aspect of environmental rights because women, particularly those in the developing world, are disproportionately harmed by climate change (Alston 2013). Women's greater vulnerability to climate change is explained by women's comparatively higher levels of poverty, greater gendered familial responsibilities than men, less frequent land ownership, lower levels of education. These factors result in differential effects on women, the most severe of which is an increased risk of death during a 'climate event' such as a hurricane or tsunami (Dankelman 2010; Alston 2013; Women Watch). However, international discussions about solutions to climate change often exclude women (Alston 2013), even though women can

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<sup>1</sup> Fighting for gendered language in UNFCCC documents is a strategy to achieve influence because it provides a codified structure in which to advocate and brings greater visibility to gendered issues in climate change. However, one could argue that it is a measure of NGO influence because it indicates greater visibility. Because it is something that the WGC actively pursues, I choose here to view it as an advocacy tactic rather than a measure of influence.

provide unique solutions to climate change because they have different perspectives than their male counterparts (Ciplet 2014).

Because of the disastrous effects of climate change on women, as well as their unique perspectives for solutions, it is necessary to ‘gender mainstream’ discussions about climate change, which involves taking into account these gendered effects (Hemmati & Röhr 2009). Gender mainstreaming ensures that concerns about gendered impacts are incorporated into policies that are not specifically about gender, and may “increase the efficiency of...climate change policy development” (Hemmati & Röhr 2009, 20). If gender mainstreaming does not happen, “progress toward gender equity may be threatened” (Hemmati & Röhr 2009, 20). To ensure that climate change discourse is not only sensitive to the gendered effects of climate change, but also includes discussion of gender-just or gender-responsive solutions to climate change, women’s environmental groups have begun to advocate more fiercely in international domains.

### **The UNFCCC and the WGC**

Meetings sponsored by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), traditionally the annual Conference of Parties (COP) and the subsidiary body meetings, are the main arena for climate change discourse. The UNFCCC is a 1994 treaty intended to prevent further anthropogenic (man-made) climate change by holding developed countries accountable for lowering and stabilizing greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations n.d.). All signatories of the treaty meet annually at the COP to “discuss and develop the targets

for limiting greenhouse gas emissions” (Women and Gender Constituency n.d.). NGOs also attend to offer expertise and opinions on the proceedings, and these groups form 'constituencies'.

One of these groups is the Women and Gender Constituency, which is the “platform for observer organizations working to ensure women’s rights and gender justice within the climate change convention framework” (Women and Gender Constituency n.d.). This constituency consists of I/NGOs and individuals that fight for gender-just climate solutions around the world. The constituency has multiple purposes, including exchanging information between different women’s environmental rights NGOs, influencing the decisions of the UNFCCC as a whole, and making sure that women’s NGOS have a voice in the conference proceedings (Women and Gender Constituency n.d.). The greater success the WGC has at UNFCCC proceedings, the more likely it is that UNFCCC programs for both mitigation and adaptation will be gender-just.

### **Advocacy Strategies**

My research question examines the advocacy strategies of the WGC, so my theoretical debate discusses various arguments about how NGOs can best gain influence within international organizations (IOs). I accept that NGOs work within a TAN, and I focus specifically on two arguments that would affect levels of influence: possessing material power and manipulating public opinion. These areas were selected because there is currently disagreement over how effective these strategies are at helping NGOs to gain influence within and over members of IOs. Lastly, I discuss the idea of an ‘information access exchange relationship’ as the most effective route to gain influence within an IO.

## **The Role of Transnational Advocacy Networks**

Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) consist of domestic and international non-governmental organizations (I/NGOs), IOs, states, individuals, and any other groups that promote particular goals and ideas. TANs include all actors “working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (Keck & Sikkink 1999, 89). TANs play a crucial role in guiding international discourse, but TANs also influence the effectiveness of an NGO. Belonging to a TAN allows an NGO to partner with other organizations, as the anti-gun control movement did when it coordinated with members of the US-based National Rifle Association to prevent further gun control in Brazil (Bob 2012). Additionally, “networks serve as mobilizing structures bringing ideas, expertise, and energy that facilitate influence in IOs” according to Joachim (as cited in Tallberg et al. 2015). Networks allow different actors to come together and advocate for the same issue, and thus give NGOs greater influence than if they were working individually. TAN membership underscores all other arguments of how an NGO can best gain influence.

## **Possession of Material Resources**

The influence of material resources on NGO effectiveness in IOs has recently become contested. Andreas Uhre argues that the amount of financial resources that an NGO has access to plays a large role in the NGO's ability to participate in IOs such as the UNFCCC's COP and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (2014). In turn, access to financial resources may affect the ability of I/NGOs to influence key players in UN climate negotiations. Hanegraaff et al. also argue that “overall wealth” of an NGO is a “key explanatory factor” in NGO presence at IOs



(2015, 1593). However, Tallberg et al. found that resource endowment plays a minimal role in NGO capability to influence IOs (2015).

### **Manipulating Public Opinion**

The manipulation of public opinion and gaining media attention is a popular strategy for NGOs to gain influence within international climate negotiations. This is known as an ‘outside’ strategy, and in the case of the climate protection movement, it is used to “give polluters and environmentally harmful corporations negative public exposure” (Gulbrandsen & Andresen 2004, 56). Keck and Sikkink further classify this influence over public opinion as ‘symbolic politics’ when NGOs attempt to draw attention to an issue and change perceptions, and as ‘accountability politics’ when a network draws attention to a government or IO for not fulfilling its promises (1999, 95). NGOs have long been known to use ‘naming and shaming’ as a strategy to draw public attention to an issue and thus pressure states. While Keck and Sikkink’s work focuses on state influence, in this case, naming and shaming can be used by I/NGOs to pressure Party members at the UNFCCC into compliance with climate protection. However, Tallberg et al. found that swaying public opinion does not affect the ability of NGOs to influence IOs (2015).

### **Information Access Exchange**

Tallberg et al. argue that the key to effective NGO lobbying is through a reciprocal ‘information access exchange’ relationship (2015). NGOs provide specialized information to IOs, and in return, IOs grant NGOs participation in international forums, where they can attempt to influence policy. Differing from previous arguments where NGOs were thought to lose

influence if they are perceived as partial or biased by the IO, Tallberg et al. argue that IOs acknowledge the implicit biases of the NGOs who are providing information (2015).

Additionally, Keck and Sikkink argue that ‘information politics,’ providing both statistics and testimonials to IOs and states, are effective strategies for NGOs and TANs to gain influence (1999).

## **Methods**

To gather information on the advocacy strategies of the Women and Gender Constituency, I traveled to Bonn, Germany, for the May 2017 UNFCCC Bonn Climate Conference, which consisted of the UNFCCC meetings of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SB46), the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA 46), and the third part of the first session of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement (APA1-3). While there I interviewed 8 representatives of NGO members of the WGC, and two UNFCCC officials to further determine their views of NGO and overall WGC advocacy effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Interviews lasted 15-30 minutes, depending on participant willingness and availability. Interviews were open-ended and followed a normal conversational pattern to encourage genuine responses from participants, and included questions such as “What strategies does your organization view as important to gaining influence in climate negotiations?” and “what role do you think public opinion plays in gaining influence?”

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<sup>2</sup> Representatives of the following organizations agreed to be interviewed: the Women’s Environment & Development Organization, LIFE-Education Environment Equality e.V., Women in Europe for a Common Future, GenderCC-Women for Climate Justice, the United Nations’ Climate Technology Centre and Network, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat. In some cases, multiple representatives from one organization were interviewed, and in others, only one representative agreed to an interview. Participants were identified due to their active involvement in the WGC and through the “snowball method.”

Interviews are the best way to identify the WGC's advocacy strategies because interviews create the opportunity to gain knowledge from people who are intimately involved in the UNFCCC's processes. Additionally, I attended numerous workshops and side events related to gender, human rights, non-party participation, and other various topics. I analyze the data from these interviews and observations qualitatively by looking for key terms related to each of the theories of how NGOs gain visibility around their issues.

From the literature surrounding NGO influence within IOs, I hypothesize the following: The WGC relies on TAN membership, possessing material resources, and manipulating public opinion to gain influence within UNFCCC proceedings, and the more specialized information they can provide to Party members and the Secretariat, the more access (and influence) they will receive.

### **The Advocacy Strategies of the WGC**

TAN membership, material resources, the manipulation of public opinion, and an information-access exchange all play a role in the advocacy strategies of the WGC. Additionally, personal relationships, language in UNFCCC documents,<sup>3</sup> and issue linkage are utilized by the WGC to achieve more gender-just climate solutions. Ultimately, multiple strategies are used in different ways depending on the context of the advocacy work, but according to members of the Women and Gender Constituency, the most effective way of achieving influence within

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<sup>3</sup> There are many types of official documents within UNFCCC proceedings. Submissions are documents sent to the UNFCCC Secretariat that give recommendations on how to implement and/or improve programs. Interventions are speeches delivered during plenary sessions, and position papers are papers submitted to the Secretariat that clarify a Party or non-Party stakeholder group's opinion on an issue.

international climate negotiations is through cultivating and maintaining personal relationships with other activists, Party members, and UNFCCC officials.

## **TANs**

A common issue brought up during interviews was the importance of national and international advocacy. As one activist stated, certain members of the WGC prefer to work with their national government and are only nominally involved in the constituency while other WGC members focus heavily on advocacy at UNFCCC events in addition to pressuring their states' governments (Interview May 15 2017). Overall, different activists are pressuring their government officials in domestic and international arenas. Having good relationships<sup>4</sup> with individual Party members who support the goals of the WGC benefit the constituency as a whole because these relationships increase the influence of the WGC. Additionally, I observed multiple instances of the WGC coordinating with other groups, especially the youth NGOs and indigenous peoples' organizations. This coordination allowed these groups (which all have a common interest in promoting human rights within climate change discourse) to avoid silo-ing their individual issues. This finding supports the generally accepted theory that TANs are generally more powerful than an individual group fighting on an issue.

## **Material Resources**

Collectively, members of the WGC agreed that having access to material resources greatly affects the potential of the constituency to gain influence in UNFCCC meetings in a

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<sup>4</sup> A 'good relationship' is a relationship where both people and/or groups trust each other, support the other's goals, and share pertinent information with each other.

direct contrast to Tallberg et al.'s findings. While material resources themselves do not necessarily affect influence, having access to material resources enables WGC members to attend UNFCCC meetings and increase their visibility. Members are not paid for their work, so it can be a financial strain for NGOs to send people to conferences and the COP, and all members' work at UNFCCC functions is in addition to the mandates members must fulfill from their organizations. While there is frequent overlap between the goals of the WGC and the goals of the organizations that belong to the WGC, members' primary allegiance is almost always to the organizations they represent.

Access to resources also affects size and demographics of the WGC delegation, and multiple activists commented on the difficulties of amplifying the voices of traditionally marginalized groups (specifically women from low-income countries) without having funding to bring them to conferences. Business and industry NGOs can bring massive delegations because of their access to funding, and this leads to an imbalance of messaging to reporters and other outside organizations. Money also affects relationships between Party members and non-Party stakeholders, as relationships are built on longevity. Continued attendance at meetings lead to familiarity and can be instrumental to developing good relationships with Party members, and without funding it can be impossible for activists to attend every conference and further these key relationships.

### **Public Opinion**

WGC members agreed that influencing public opinion can be beneficial to their cause, but that it can be notoriously difficult to harness this power successfully. "Creating a buzz

around” certain issues can draw media attention which increases the visibility of the WGC, but it can be very difficult to create media interest around gender-based issues (Interview 9 May 2017). Because gender “is a cross cutting issue, it’s not easy to understand small pieces” and the media needs a “hot topic” rather than an in-depth explanation of the myriad ways in which climate change affects women and the work the WGC does around these issues (Interview 11 May 2017 and 17 May 2017).<sup>5</sup> However, according to one activist, while it can be difficult to pressure Party members at UNFCCC events, “if there’s a media shit storm at home...they [Party members] feel that they have to react to that news” (Interview 17 May 2017). Manipulating public opinion can be powerful, but it is very difficult to do successfully.

### **Information-Access Exchange**

Members of the constituency generally support the idea of an information-access exchange between the WGC and Party members. These activists feel that they are granted better access to Party members and UNFCCC officials in return for providing specialized information of the effects climate change has on women. This greater access has been granted through the continued growth of the constituency as well as a greater UNFCCC focus on the relationship between gender and climate, as demonstrated through the appointment of a designated contact person for gender and climate change issues, side events on gender, etc. However, WGC members agree that this information access exchange is limited in its capacity, because providing specialized knowledge does not always guarantee greater access. For example, at the Bonn

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<sup>5</sup> Besides the work at UNFCCC meetings, the WGC and its individual members are highly involved in the fight against climate change. Members create awareness around the link between gender and the effects of climate change, fight for gender-just solutions to climate change, provide financial, technical, and logistical support to gender-responsive programs, among other things.

Climate Conference was a Party meeting about non-stakeholder engagement that was not only closed to non-Party members, but denied a request to open it to non-Party members. This closed session shut out all WGC members (and all other non-Party constituencies), even though they could have provided valuable insight on how to effectively engage with non-Party stakeholders. While providing specialized information in order to gain greater influence and access is a useful strategy, it is not always effective.

### **Personal Relationships**

WGC activists consistently stressed the importance of carefully cultivating personal relationships as the best strategy for advancing their agenda and gaining influence. Relationships with important Party members can lead to receiving information from closed sessions and having inside information about the direction in which Party negotiations are moving. Developing relationships also helps members of the WGC know who to collaborate with on certain actions and activities, and find allies with whom they can share best practices. Successful interpersonal relationships also lead to greater visibility of not only the person in the relationship, but of their NGO and the WGC as a whole. Because the Secretariat and the UNFCCC are a Party-driven process, it is crucial for observer organizations to partner with Parties and other organizations to advance their agenda of promoting non-Party stakeholder rights.

According to respondents, the relationship between the WGC and the Office of the Secretariat is also key to furthering WGC influence within UNFCCC negotiations. The relationship was described as being one of “trust” and “good and constructive” to both the Secretariat and the WGC (Interview on 11 May 2017 and 16 May 2017). The Secretariat, despite

being a neutral facilitator of Party discussion, knows who could be a strategic ally and potential entry points for the WGC to place pressure on Party members to support certain causes. The Secretariat also sets the agenda for sessions, and by placing gender on the agenda, Parties then have a mandate to address gender-based climate issues.

## **Language**

Language within UNFCCC documents was also consistently mentioned as being of key importance to the constituency, because language is the “main guidance” and provides a “reinforcing framework” for the UNFCCC (Interview 12 May 2017). Until the COP in Doha, there was no language in official documents that set a mandate for the UNFCCC to work on gender issues related to climate change, and it is “not insignificant that it [gender issues] became a standing item for the COP” (Interview 12 May 2017). The UNFCCC needs mandates to work on certain issues, and without the appropriate language in the mandate, it is nearly impossible garner support from Parties, much less funding from the Secretariat, for gender-based climate responses.

Respondents offered differing opinions on the importance of language in submissions to the Secretariat, interventions during plenary sessions, and position papers. Some activists felt that these documents helped greatly to increase visibility and power, while others felt that the documents had only minor impacts. However, all interviewees did agree that submissions, interventions, and position papers help to increase visibility of the constituency at some level, even if these papers lack the binding power of language in official UNFCCC documents.



## **Issue Linkage**

Issue linkage is another strategy successfully used by the WGC. The WGC coordinates with many groups, particularly members of youth NGOs, environmental NGOs, and indigenous peoples' organizations because of their common interest in furthering human rights at the UNFCCC meetings. These groups “push for human rights together” and ensure that their individual submissions always mention women’s rights, indigenous peoples’ rights, and youth rights in a bloc (Interview 15 May 2017). However, while it logically makes sense to advance human rights issues together to avoid silo-ing problems, another alternative was proposed by a UNFCCC official. According to a representative of the UNFCCC Secretariat, some Parties are opposed to human rights as a bloc but may support individual forms of human rights, which indicates that the various non-Party stakeholder representatives might have better success with certain Party members if they advocate only for their issues.

### **Suggestions for Improved Advocacy**

Considering the responses from WGC activists, the best way to increase the power of the WGC is through building better relationships with other non-Party stakeholders, individual Party members and Party delegations, and UNFCCC officials. Doing so will increase the benefits already present in having close relationships with people outside of the constituency. Additionally, focusing on finding more “hot topic” issues to dangle in front of the press (at UNFCCC meetings and in activists’ home countries) could benefit the constituency. Further engaging the press will lead to greater visibility of not just the constituency but also increased awareness of the effects that climate change and climate events have on women. Finally, in

certain situations, the constituency should consider pushing harder for women's rights rather than human rights. This is *not* to imply that non-Party stakeholder groups should abandon their alliances each other and fight only in self-interest, rather, it is to suggest that all of these groups continue to support bloc human rights in interventions and submissions but lobby only for their particular issues in individual advocacy areas. This strategy has the benefit of still promoting human rights overall in events like plenary sessions so as to avoid total silo-ing, but advocating individually circumvents the issue of certain Party members being opposed to bloc human rights.

### **Conclusion**

This research contributes to a larger body of literature related to different advocacy strategies pursued by NGOs, particularly in international climate politics. It further explains how the WGC uses advocacy strategies to incorporate gender just solutions to climate change and provides recommendations for how to improve advocacy strategies. Its biggest limitation is the short period of time in which the study took place, and another limitation is the number of activists and members of organizations interviewed. Future research should examine the actions of the WGC through multiple climate conferences, particularly at future COPs, and should interview greater numbers of activists from even more organizations.

Overall, my research indicates that the WGC uses multiple strategies to achieve their goals, which is common in advocacy work. It also indicates that developing interpersonal relationships is the best way to advocate for gender-just climate solutions, but that other strategies can also be effective when used correctly, e.g. manipulating the press 'at home' to pressure Party members. Interestingly, the idea of separating women's rights from indigenous peoples' rights from youth

rights etc. is in contrast to norms of advancing human rights as a bloc, and this topic should be explored in future research.

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