Aktiv Asia

Climate, Care, and Collective Change: Reimagining Feminist Leadership in Asia

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Executive Summary

Climate justice movements across Asia are increasingly shaped by feminist leadership— leadership that is grounded in equity, participation, and systemic transformation. Feminist leadership in climate justice challenges dominant, technocratic approaches that often marginalize women, Indigenous peoples, and other vulnerable communities. Rather than treating these groups as victims, feminist approaches position them as agents of change who bring critical knowledge and experience to climate solutions.

Key Insight

Feminist leadership transforms communities—not just individuals

Leadership programs rooted in feminist values have ripple effects beyond individual empowerment. Respondents consistently emphasized that these programs led to collective gains, such as strengthened local organizing, intergenerational mentoring, and policy engagement.

Feminist leadership programs foster self-awareness and collective power

Respondents emphasized that feminist leadership development helped them reflect on their positionality, build confidence in their own voice, and anchor their work in community accountability—not just technical capacity.

Feminist Leadership as Climate Justice

At the core of this leadership model is power redistribution—not only addressing who is affected by climate change, but also who makes decisions about how to respond. Feminist leadership demands that climate policies take into account structural inequalities based on gender, class, ethnicity, and geography, as well as historical injustices like colonialism and land dispossession. This review examines feminist leadership development in these movements in key locations in Asia - Indonesia, Philippines, South Koreahighlighting key frameworks, practices, and regional actors.

Review Design

Methodology

This strategic review evaluates AktivAsia's current women's leadership development program as well as surface models and program elements that support women and marginalized groups as change agents in their own contexts.

We employed a mixed-methods approach including:

- **Content analysis of 52 online survey responses** from former participants and partners
- **21 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with feminist leaders**, movement organizers across Asia
- **Desk review of feminist leadership literature**

Key Objectives of the Review

This strategic review evaluates AktivAsia's current women's leadership development program as well as surface models and program elements that support women and marginalized groups as change agents in their own contexts.

1. ### SWOT Analysis
Understand strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the current leadership training model.

2. ### Best Practices and Alternatives
Surface alternative leadership models—particularly from Asia—that successfully apply feminist and decolonial approaches.

3. ### Evaluation Framework
Develop a robust tool to assess impact, sustainability, and responsiveness.

Opportunities

Pilot Design
Identify context-driven elements for a pilot model to test and refine.

Resource Mobilization
Map strategic partnerships and funding sources for scaling.

Collaborative Strategy
Emphasize multi-sectoral, cross-border collaborations for sustained feminist leadership development.

Content Analysis

The content analysis of 53 survey responses and 20 interviews examined five key areas:

- **Leadership journeys of women leaders within climate justice movements**
- **Barriers to feminist leadership within climate justice movements**
- **Effective capacity-building approaches to feminist leadership development**
- **Support systems to sustain a feminist climate justice ecosystem and**
- **Measures of individual and community impact.**

How we conducted our review

APRIL – JULY 2025

STEP 1 → **STEP 2** → **STEP 3** → **STEP 4** → **STEP 5**

Develop Review Framework and Inception Report Create

Create research tools, modalities and schedule interviews

Collect data from 3 sources: (1) Review of Lit, (2) Online survey, (3) Key Informant Interviews

Analyze data, identifying thematic areas and initial findings

Submit recommendations

How we conducted our analysis

1. Articulating the Feminist Lens

Clarify **why** a feminist review is necessary.

Identify the **intersectional feminist frameworks** used.

Map out **whose knowledge is prioritized** – often privileging the perspectives of women, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, and other marginalized groups.

2. Gathering and Analyzing Lived Realities

Use **narrative, qualitative, and participatory tools**.

Analyze how **power structures** affect access, outcomes, and participation.

Disaggregate experiences by **gender, class, ethnicity, ability, age, and geography**.

Surface **themes of harm, resistance, agency, and transformation** in policies, programs, and practices.

3. Reframing Power and Proposing Change

Offer **recommendations rooted in justice and equity** (not just technical fixes).

Reimagine programs through **care-centered, community-led, and rights-based approaches.**

Advocate for shifts in **institutional accountability, resource flows, and movement solidarity.**

Frame feminist proposals not only as demands but as **collective visions for liberated futures.**

Participants' Profiles

ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

53

AktivAsia Program Participants

ONLINE KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

20

AktivAsia workshop participant, community partner or regional leader

Profile of Online Survey Participants

The 53 online survey participants represent a diverse cross-section of climate and gender justice advocates across South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Pakistan, with participation somewhat evenly distributed among these countries. A majority of respondents are women (57%) and younger individuals aged 18–30 years old (53%), reflecting a strong presence of emerging feminist leaders in the region. Notably, 27% identify as rural-based, 21% as Indigenous, and 10% as LGBTQ+, underscoring the intersectional realities shaping their leadership experiences and perspectives within climate justice movements.

Country of Residence

26.4% Philippines

22.6% Indonesia

20.8% South Korea

Others 30.2%

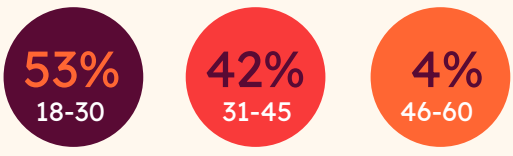
How do you identify your gender?

56.6% Woman

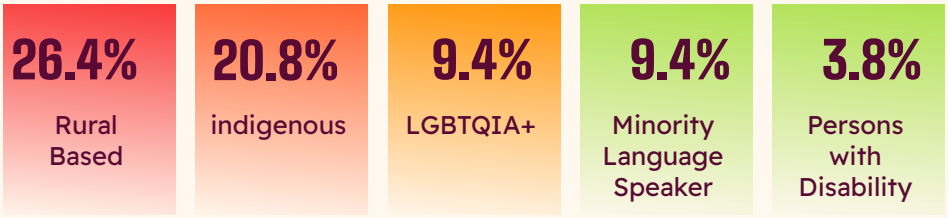
37.7% Man

3.8% Non Binary

Age



Do you identify within the following groups?



Profile of Individual Key Participant Interviews

The key participant interviews involved **20 women working within climate justice movements across Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and regionally-based organizations in Southeast Asia**. They represent a wide range of **leadership roles—from entry-level community organizers and program officers to senior managers, researchers, and executive decision-makers**— reflecting the diverse ecosystem of feminist leadership within the region. Most respondents are affiliated with **civil society organizations, people's movements, academic and research institutions, and multilateral or international NGOs** engaged in advancing gender-responsive climate action.

Their work spans grassroots organizing, disaster risk reduction, and naturebased adaptation, to policy advocacy, knowledge generation, and regional coordination, revealing how women's leadership operates across multiple levels of influence. Several respondents are embedded in frontline, climate-vulnerable communities, while others contribute to national or regional policy spaces, creating a valuable intersection between local realities and systemic reform efforts.

Collectively, their perspectives highlight both the progress and persistent barriers faced by women and gender-diverse people in accessing leadership opportunities, resources, and decision-making spaces in the climate justice field. This diversity of experiences underscores the importance of nurturing feminist, inclusive, and locally rooted leadership models to advance equitable and sustainable climate solutions in the region.

Individual Key Interview Participants were evenly located across the 4 locations of AktivAsia Country Programs - Indonesia (30%), Philippines (20%), South Korea (20%) and Region (30%).

Participants serve many roles within our regional climate justice movement ecosystem- from entry level positions to leadership posts. A significant number of participants (55%) are experienced leaders performing decision-making roles.

Best Practices:
Building Feminist Power in Asia

Women's leadership is not only critical to advancing gender equality—it is central to achieving climate justice. Research consistently shows that women, especially from frontline and Indigenous communities, are disproportionately affected by climate change, yet remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) underscores that gender-equitable leadership is essential for strengthening climate resilience, while UN Women (2022) calls for integrated strategies that recognize women as agents of change, not merely victims of environmental crises.

In the Asian context, patriarchal governance, shrinking civic space, and climate-induced displacement compound the barriers to leadership for women and marginalized groups. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2021), only 18% of senior decision-making roles in environmental governance across Asia- Pacific are held by women. Additionally, climate action funding in the region rarely prioritizes or reaches grassroots women-led initiatives (WEDO & Oxfam, 2020).

Existing leadership development programs often default to Western-centric, individualist frameworks that emphasize skills-building over collective empowerment or systemic transformation. Feminist scholars such as Srilatha Batliwala (2011) critique these models for reinforcing hierarchical notions of leadership and failing to account for structural inequities. Furthermore, programs are often shortterm, elite-focused, or disconnected from lived community realities.

To be truly transformative, leadership development must be grounded in feminist and decolonial praxis. Feminist leadership emphasizes accountability, relational power, and care ethics—challenging dominant paradigms that center control, charisma, and competitiveness (Just Associates, 2018). Decolonial approaches push this further by insisting on the leadership of Indigenous and Global South women, the centering of ancestral knowledge systems, and the dismantling of donor-driven, extractive programming models (Shawoo et al., 2021).

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR)

One of the most well-documented approaches to building feminist leadership in Asia is Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), pioneered by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). FPAR supports grassroots women to lead research processes, gather evidence on the impacts of climate change in their communities, and use this knowledge to influence policy. This model has been implemented in over nine countries and has engaged women in diverse contexts, from urban poor communities to Indigenous villages. Studies show that FPAR strengthens women's leadership by building skills in advocacy, organizing, and evidencebased storytelling. For example, in Indonesia, women who participated in FPAR went on to hold leadership roles in disaster preparedness committees and local government dialogues.

Gendertransformative Approaches and Economic Resilience

Another strand of feminist climate leadership in Asia focuses on building economic resilience through collective organizing. A recent study by Saigal and Srivastava (2025) outlines a gendertransformative framework for climate action, which includes supporting women-led cooperatives, integrating social protection with environmental planning, and amplifying women's stories in regional languages. Women-led cooperatives and self-help groups across South and Southeast Asia have proven effective in increasing women's income and food security while enabling leadership within communities. For instance, agricultural cooperatives led by women in the Philippines and Nepal have diversified local economies, improved disaster recovery, and nurtured solidarity networks that are critical during climate shocks.

Indigenous and Intersectional Leadership

Feminist leadership in Asia is also deeply informed by intersectionality—the understanding that gender interacts with other social identities like class, caste, ethnicity, and age. Indigenous women leaders have brought visibility to traditional ecological knowledge and land-based practices, which are often excluded from mainstream climate discourse.

One example is Seno Tsuhah, a Chakhesang Naga woman leader from Northeast India, who has championed seed biodiversity and food sovereignty through women's collectives. Her work has received international recognition and is often cited in global climate justice spaces like the COP and UN biodiversity negotiations.

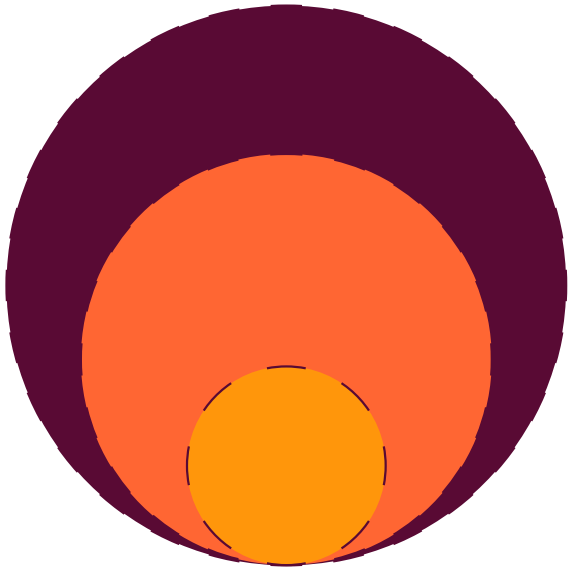
Organizations such as Lilak (Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights) in the Philippines and the Center for Disaster Preparedness support Indigenous women's leadership through education, advocacy, and movement building.
These efforts center land rights, cultural survival, and resistance to extractivist industries.

A key issue across contexts is that women, regardless of their geographic or socio-economic background, remain underrepresented in climate-related decision-making processes. This exclusion is not only unjust but also counterproductive, as it sidelines valuable perspectives and leadership that could strengthen climate responses.

Even in more developed settings like the United States, policy has only recently begun to acknowledge these gendered dimensions. For example, a 2009 U.S. House of Representatives resolution recognized the unequal impacts of climate change on women and advocated for gender-sensitive policy frameworks. Yet these statements often fall short of transforming the systemic barriers that limit women's participation and power in shaping climate futures.

Barriers to Feminist Leadership Within Climate Justice Movements

Based on the responses from online survey respondents and key participant interviews, several common challenges emerged that hinder the cultivation of feminist leadership in climate justice movements across Asia. Participants highlighted systemic, cultural, and movement-level barriers that limit their ability to lead meaningfully and sustainably.



Internal

Feminist leaders, especially young women or those from marginalized communities, often internalize societal messages of inferiority, leading to hesitancy and lack of confidence in leadership roles.

There is often confusion or lack of clarity about what feminist leadership means, especially in organizations that have not adopted gender justice frameworks. This absence creates friction between values and practice.

Many women leaders shoulder a dual burden: formal activism and unpaid care or domestic responsibilities. This overextension results in exhaustion and mental health strain, compounded by lack of emotional support.

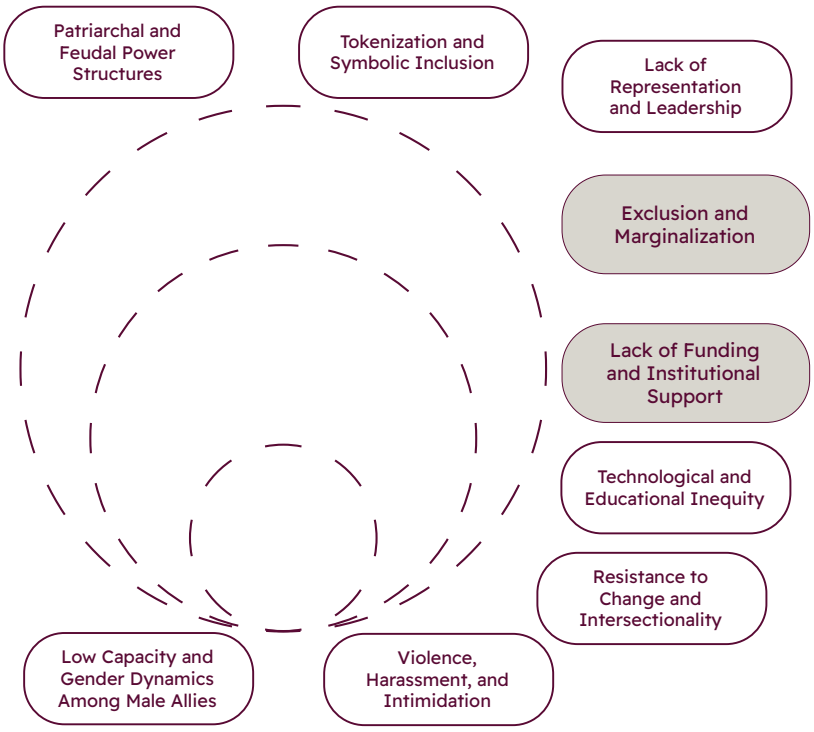
Burnout and Emotional Labor

Feminist leaders often bear dual responsibilities at home and in movements, with little support for childcare, eldercare, or rest. A seasoned organizer from Indonesia said, “How do we create enabling ecosystems that support feminist leaders through failure, backlash, and reinvention?” Many described how the constant demand to hold space for others’ pain, mediate conflicts, and sustain morale takes a deep emotional toll. Without collective structures of rest, redistribution, and emotional support, burnout becomes a systemic barrier that undermines the sustainability and growth of feminist leadership in climate justice movements.

Retaliation for Speaking Up

Many women face career or reputational consequences for challenging power dynamics. A Filipino climate leader noted, “Women leaders experience aggression and hostility, especially in politically contentious areas like energy transitions.” Some reported being sidelined from decision-making spaces or losing funding opportunities after speaking out against gender bias. Others described subtle forms of retaliation — being labeled “difficult,” excluded from collaborations, or denied credit for their work — as a way to silence feminist leadership and discourage accountability.

> After raising feminist issues in our office, I was quietly disinvited from succeeding meetings.
>
> Regional Climate Justice Leader, Philippines



External

Climate spaces — especially in regions like rural Indonesia, Philippines and S Korea — are deeply embedded in patriarchal systems and, at times, feudal hierarchies. These structures actively limit women’s agency, voice, and safety.

Women and gender-diverse leaders are often included for appearance rather than influence—excluded from actual decision-making or agenda-setting processes.

Feminist leaders from indigenous, rural, or low-income backgrounds face added layers of discrimination. Their work is often dismissed as non-strategic or too local to be impactful.

Patriarchal Power Structures and Gender Norms

Leadership roles are still shaped by patriarchal expectations. Deeply rooted gender roles and social hierarchies suppress women’s leadership. These norms create environments where women’s contributions are undervalued or sidelined.

> Why do people still turn to the man when I'm the ED? It doesn't offend me anymore—I see it now. I can name it.

Climate Justice Activist, Philippines

Tokenism and Symbolic Inclusion

Women are often invited to "tick boxes," but not entrusted with real decision-making. One experience shared by a conservation executive from Indonesia: Environmental organizations and community structures are deeply patriarchal. Women are often included as tokens, not as power holders. She noted that true redistribution of power threatens the status quo, triggering backlash even from initial supporters (e.g., the husbands of women forest rangers).discourage accountability.

Lack of Intersectionality

Queer, Indigenous, and disabled leaders feel excluded from "mainstream" feminist and environmental spaces. One Executive Director in Indonesia noted, "Effective spaces are immersive and reflective, not just didactic—allowing for rest, healing, and joy alongside shared learning."

Disconnect Between Feminist Thinking and Technical Climate Work

Climate policies and science often remain gender-blind or technocratic. One Indonesia-based respondent challenges conventional, masculinized models of leadership that demand emotional suppression, perfection, and knowledge authority.

> Recognizing and holding multiple identities-mother, leader, daughter, activist-was central to developing a fuller, more sustainable leadership practice.

Feminist Climate Justice Educator, Australia

Urban and Language Biases

Power is concentrated in English-speaking, urban NGO circles. Leadership opportunities are often concentrated in capital cities or with educated women. Rural and grassroots women leaders, despite their deep community knowledge, are often invited only as "beneficiaries" rather than decision-makers. This urban bias reinforces class and linguistic barriers, making it harder for local and Indigenous women to shape national or international climate agendas that directly impact their lives.

> There's an urgent need to ensure rural women are not left behind in the leadership discourse. Leadership must feel relevant and safe, not elite or urban-centric.
>
> Climate justice leader, Indonesia

Hostility and Infighting Within Movements

Scarcity of resources and ideological rifts can create a hostile climate within movements. One feminist organizer from the Philippines shared, "I know the heartbreak of expecting solidarity from other women in leadership, only to encounter competition or ego.

Practical Gendered Needs Are Overlooked

Reproductive health, domestic violence, and menstruation-related issues are rarely considered in program design or fieldwork. Women and gender-diverse activists often lack access to safe spaces, healthcare, or menstrual hygiene resources during climate campaigns and disaster response work. These unmet needs increase stress and absenteeism, making sustained engagement and leadership in the climate justice movement more difficult.

Insecure and Inaccessible Funding

Women-led groups struggle with short-term, restrictive grants. "Environmental organizations in Indonesia still predominantly have male leaders, and systemic investment in feminist leadership pipelines is rare. Institutions that do nurture women leaders use deliberate strategies, mentorship, and differentiated approaches for gender equity."

Case Studies:
Realtalk From Three Feminists

Claiming Feminist Climate Justice in the Philippines

A Filipina feminist activist and global engagement manager working with a widely-recognized INGO, reflected on her personal and political journey of integrating feminism into environmental activism. Her story captures the tensions, breakthroughs, and evolving leadership practices that shape feminist climate justice work in the Philippines and globally.

Her early years in advocacy began within a young feminist collective and later with movements addressing economic justice policies, where she first linked gender and climate change in 2008—before the issue became mainstream. Yet, she recalls feeling divided: "I had two identities—feminist activist and environmentalist—and they never met." This internal struggle mirrored a broader disconnection within movements that treated ecological and gender justice as separate realms.

Within a mainstream environmental organization, she helped drive a shift from traditional environmentalism toward climate justice framework—rooted in intersectionality and systems thinking.

She championed approaches that looked beyond litigation or technical solutions to address structural inequities, extractivism, and human rights. "We're winning the battle but losing the war," she reflects, "because we haven't achieved systems change." Her vision of feminist leadership departs from conventional, results-driven models. Through organizational research and mentoring, she found that transformative leadership emerges from empathy, care, and collaboration — measured not by reports or activities but by real change in people's lives. This perspective deepened after Typhoon Yolanda, when she helped lead a more community-based, traumainformed response:

"We used to be extractive — gathering stories for campaigns. Now we ask, 'How can we support those affected and involve them in the solution?'"

She also names enduring challenges: intergenerational divides in language and strategy, persistent patriarchal hierarchies in movement spaces, and the feminization of fundraising labor within underfunded feminist initiatives. Yet she remains committed to building inclusive, valuesdriven spaces where people can safely claim their feminist identities. "You can't just say you're a feminist," she asserts. "It should be evident in how your community experiences it." Her story exemplifies feminist leadership as both a personal reckoning and a collective practice—rooted in care, accountability, and the courage to transform movements from within.

Bridging the Divide in Indonesia

Participant A's journey as a feminist leader in Indonesia emerged from the intersection of faith, environment, and gender justice. Beginning as a youth organizer in one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, she learned early that leadership means understanding oneself through the lens of family, community, and environment. "If your environment is not safe, then your society is not safe," she reflects — a lesson that shaped her lifelong commitment to women's leadership and ecological care.

At university, she encountered feminist ideas but soon recognized a divide: many feminist movements centered on bodily rights, while environmental and agrarian struggles remained detached from gender analysis.

Determined to bridge this gap, she joined a feminist organization, where she helped develop training programs linking feminism with climate justice.

Her model of leadership development is experiential — rooted in women's daily realities rather than classroom theory.

Through a coalition of over 100 organizations, she trains women and youth to analyze climate issues through feminist and anti-extractivist perspectives. Their work connects deforestation, mining, and agrarian conflict to women's labor, health, and spirituality.

This approach has fostered tangible change: rural women now advocate for equal pay, share domestic labor, and engage confidently with government officials. Discussions around women's rights that were once limited to private spaces now shape local organizing around food sovereignty and environmental justice. Amid a political and cultural landscape resistant to trans inclusion and feminist environmental leadership, her work insists that gender and climate justice are inseparable. As she puts it, "Women and our land are not different things. To protect one is to protect the other."

Breaking the Glass Ceiling of Climate Leadership in South Korea

In South Korea's climate justice movement, women form nearly 80% of campaigners and educators — but remain starkly underrepresented in decision-making. A feminist climate activist working with a mainstream environmental group, names this contradiction as both disheartening and galvanizing. "Most women lead citizen campaigns and education," she observes, "while policy-making and engagement with industry are dominated by men. When it comes to who gets the microphone, it's mostly men."
This imbalance, she explains, reflects deeper gendered hierarchies in South Korea's governance and policy spaces, where technical and economic domains—like energy transition — are still seen as masculine. Even accomplished women activists often position themselves as support rather than as central actors. "It's disappointing," she admits, "but seeing powerful female colleagues gives me courage."

Her current focus is to push beyond rhetoric and translate gender justice into concrete policy mechanisms. She notes that while "everyone agrees gender justice is important," few can articulate how to embed it in climate policy. Data gaps—especially the lack of sex- and age-disaggregated data—make it difficult to design gender-responsive programs. "We need intersectional programming for women in the climate era," she insists, "but we can't build it without data."
She envisions structural reform, not just advocacy. She proposes stronger gender quotas, mandatory representation in panels and decision-making bodies, and clear consequences for exclusion.

"If a seminar has less than 50% female speakers, we shouldn't participate," she argues, emphasizing accountability over tokenism.
She also calls for integrating United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) gender guidelines into South Korea's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) — the country's climate action commitments for 2035. "Some countries already include gender context in their NDCs," she notes. "Ours should too. Climate policies designed by men reflect male priorities — growth, industry, and GDP — rather than care, equity, and sustainability."
For her, feminist climate leadership means moving from awareness to actionable governance reform. She sees potential collaboration with AktivAsia to educate climate activists, using concrete data and frameworks from Korea's context. "You can't have climate justice without gender justice," she asserts. "We need to make that real in our laws, our policies, and our leadership."

What Support Do Climate Justice Leaders Need

To effectively lead with an intersectional feminist lens in climate justice work, our Review participants call for a multi-layered system of support that spans political education, community care, resources, safety, and connection.

1. Political Education and Feminist Training

The strongest consensus was around the need for political education and capacity-building that deepens understanding of feminist theory, power structures, climate science, and intersectionality. Emerging leaders want training that goes beyond surface-level gender sensitivity to engage more critically with how systems of oppression—such as patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and racism — intersect with ecological collapse.

Workshops, popular education programs, and accessible curricula are necessary for building this foundation. These should be grounded in local contexts while connecting to global feminist climate movements.

2. Access to Feminist Mentors and Movement Elders

Mentorship emerged as the second-highest priority. Young leaders seek guidance, political grounding, and emotional support from feminist elders who have navigated similar terrain. These mentors not only pass down knowledge but model how to sustain leadership over time, bridge intergenerational gaps, and navigate burnout and backlash. Respondents emphasized the need for mentors who represent a diversity of identities— including Indigenous women, LGBTQIA+ leaders, and people from frontline communities—so that emerging leaders can see themselves reflected in leadership.

3. Safe Spaces for Learning and Reflection

Leaders emphasized the importance of non-judgmental, safe, and inclusive spaces for personal growth, political dialogue, and emotional processing. These spaces are essential for leaders— especially those from marginalized identities—to explore complex and difficult issues, share vulnerability, and build solidarity without fear of silencing or tokenization. Such environments are crucial not just for learning, but also for healing, building trust, and nurturing new ways of leading that are not hierarchical or extractive.

4. Funding and Material Support for Organizing

Material realities cannot be overlooked. Leaders need sustained access to funding, not only for organizing and mobilizing communities but also for personal sustainability. Many feminist leaders are working in under-resourced contexts, often on a volunteer basis. They emphasized the need for flexible, trust-based funding that can support both movement work and everyday needs.Material support also includes access to tools, technology, transportation, and communications infrastructure, especially for those in rural or remote areas.

5. Mental Health and Wellbeing Support

Organizing under oppressive systems and amidst climate disaster takes a toll. Respondents called for integrated mental health support, recognizing burnout, trauma, anxiety, and grief as common experiences in movement work. Feminist leadership development should include wellbeing practices, trauma-informed care, and collective strategies for emotional resilience, rest, and joy.

6. Tools to Navigate Backlash and Harassment

Leaders emphasized the importance of non-judgmental, safe, and inclusive spaces for personal growth, political dialogue, and emotional processing. These spaces are essential for leaders— especially those from marginalized identities—to explore complex and difficult issues, share vulnerability, and build solidarity without fear of silencing or tokenization. Such environments are crucial not just for learning, but also for healing, building trust, and nurturing new ways of leading that are not hierarchical or extractive.

Reflections On AktivAsias Feminist Adaptive Leadership (FAL) Program

Key Interview Participants described AktivAsia's feminist leadership development program as deeply grounded in localization. Participants appreciated how the program adapted to their language, landscape, and lived experiences—something not always present in other training sessions. Unlike technical approaches that miss
local realities, AktivAsia invests time in understanding communities and allows the program to evolve in response to what participants bring into the room. This responsiveness is part of the organization's core value: caring for people and their contexts.

Many participants spoke about how the program helped them extend their leadership capacity by realizing the interconnectedness of their work with others. The experience fostered solidarity — knowing others have gone through similar struggles offered strength and courage. The connections formed continue beyond the program; friendships and networks are sustained to this day.

The gender sessions and inputs offered clarity and tools for action, while exchanges across countries (e.g., Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea) expanded global perspective. Participants felt seen, affirmed, and challenged. Activities created space not only for learning but also for healing — acknowledging rest, ancestors, and emotional openness as essential to feminist practice.

Some suggested improvements included broader inclusion beyond Aktivasia's circle, engaging those with different frameworks, and bringing in perspectives beyond ciswomen or those who identify as feminists. There was a desire to explore how feminist principles can inform work in institutions like government or corporate settings. Many hoped that AktivAsia could help climate activists apply feminist and intersectional analysis more concretely — especially in places like South Korea, where gender justice is still treated as secondary to climate work. Specific policy tools and representation benchmarks (e.g., ensuring panels have 50% women) were named as critical next steps.

SWOT

Analysis of AktivAsia Feminist Adaptive Leadership Program

The moment calls for greater clarity of purpose: is this work about building a new model of feminist leadership rooted in the Global South? Or is it about equipping existing feminist movements with tools to be more strategic, sustainable, and intersecting with climate justice issues? in either case, a firm commitment to resources, coordination, and political vision is needed.

S	**Strenghts** The program centers participants' lived realities, helping them reflect on their personal and political journeys through tools like timelines of oppression and country situationers. It builds solidarity, sisterhood, and a safe space for vulnerability and learning. Exercises are both reflective and practical, linking feminist analysis to systems of patriarchy and capitalism. The model enables crosscountry collaboration and long-term relationship-building. Adaptive leadership, in particular, is appreciated as a useful framework. Many see this as transformative work that connects personal growth with collective action.	W	**Weakness** Sustainability is a challenge—relying on individuals rather than institutions limits long-term impact. Follow-up mechanisms are weak; after the initial training, participants lack structured support. There are accessibility concerns—language, cultural differences, and classroom style plenaries can be intimidating. Dependence on elite-developed tools (like Harvard models) undermines feminist values of inclusivity. Lack of dedicated funding, staffing, and ownership by organizational leaders reduces effectiveness. The training's potential remains underleveraged due to resource constraints and an unclear organizational strategy.
O	**Opportunities** There is strong demand for deeper regional exchange, advanced modules, and a shared repository of feminist leadership tools. Participants want to embed these practices in campaigning and organizational strategy. Building an institutional approach, integrating feminist facilitation, and resourcing local champions could strengthen the model. There's space for AA to lead or catalyze a regional, valuesbased model rooted in Asia.	T	**Threat** Feminist work remains underfunded and under threat—surveillance, conservative backlash, and corporate capture of feminist spaces limit progress.

Proposed Design Element

Respondents, both online and key informants, expressed that when women—particularly those most affected by climate change—are equipped with tools, resources, and collective platforms, they become powerful leaders in shaping resilient and equitable futures. Feminist leadership is not only about representation but about shifting the terms of engagement, redefining whose knowledge counts, and reimagining climate action as a justice-centered process.

Healing and Collective Care

Feminist leaders—especially those resisting corporate, military, or patriarchal power—often carry trauma. Healing is not peripheral; it's core to leadership sustainability. Feminist Leadership development recognizes the toll of climate and gender injustice. Practices of rest, storytelling, and cultural reclamation are increasingly essential components of resistance.

Movement-Building and Campaigning Skills

Technical knowledge isn't enough—leaders need to build power collectively and create real pressure for change at multiple levels. Respondents expressed frustration that while women are highly active in grassroots environmental work, they are rarely seen in decision-making roles. Feminist leadership development is thus seen as a way to elevate women from participation to power—ensuring that their expertise and lived experiences inform policy, planning, and public discourse.

Political Education Grounded In Intersectionality

This lens is essential to designing solutions that are responsive to the complexities of real life. To lead for climate justice, leaders must recognize how intersecting systems (gender, class, race, colonization) shape climate harm and solutions. Many programs help participants connect personal experience to broader structures and environmental destruction.

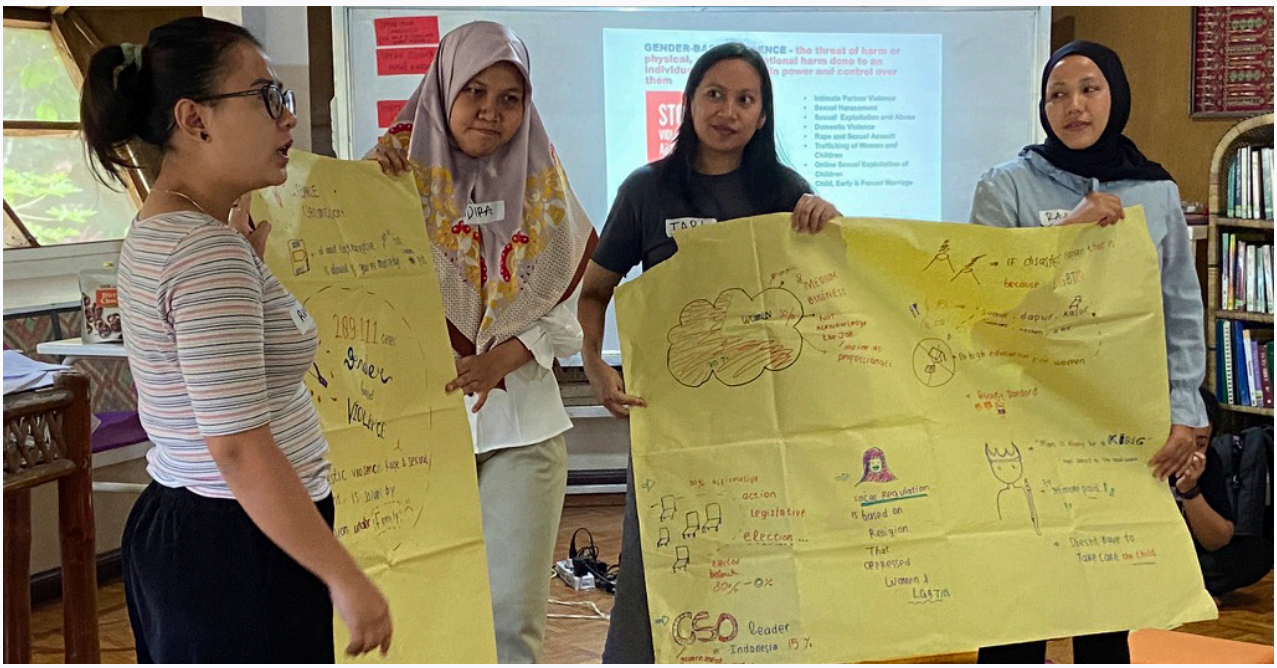
Intergenerational and Peer Mentorship

Young feminist leaders often reinvent the wheel due to missing mentorship. Elders also need safe spaces to transfer knowledge without hierarchy. A few respondents have had transformative experiences at heart-centered spaces that encouraged vulnerability, emotional honesty, and connection between seasoned and emerging leadership frameworks. A feminist leadership model is affirmed via the value of solidarity and relational leadership.

Across Asia—from the vulnerable coastal towns of the Philippines to the resource-extractive regions of Indonesia and the socially fragmented cities of South Korea — participants are unified in their belief that feminist leadership is crucial to the climate justice movement.

It is not only about placing more women in leadership roles, but about transforming the way power, knowledge, and care are organized in responding to climate change.

Understanding Impact



1 INTERNAL GROWTH AND CONFIDENCE (INDIVIDUAL LEVEL)

Success at this level looks like a shift in self-perception- participants moving from self-doubt or hesitation to a grounded confidence in their ability to speak, lead, and organize. They begin to articulate their personal politics, understand how their lived experience connects to systemic issues, and feel equipped with practical tools like power analysis or facilitation methods.

2 COMMUNITY AND PEER SUPPORT (GROUP LEVEL)

We want participants to experience deep solidarity and belonging within the cohort. The program should create a space where they feel held, understood, and safe enough to be vulnerable and bold. Relationships built through the program should extend beyond the training period-participants should continue to check in, share strategies, and lean on one another in times of challenge.

3 ACTION AND CHANGE IN THE FIELD (MOVEMENT LEVEL)

Success also means that what's learned inside the program shows up in the work participants are doing outside. This could take the form of a participant launching a local climate campaign that uses feminist principles like collective decision-making and care-centered organizing. Others may apply what they've learned to shift the way their organizations operate, integrating intersectional analysis or pausing to prioritize community well-being.

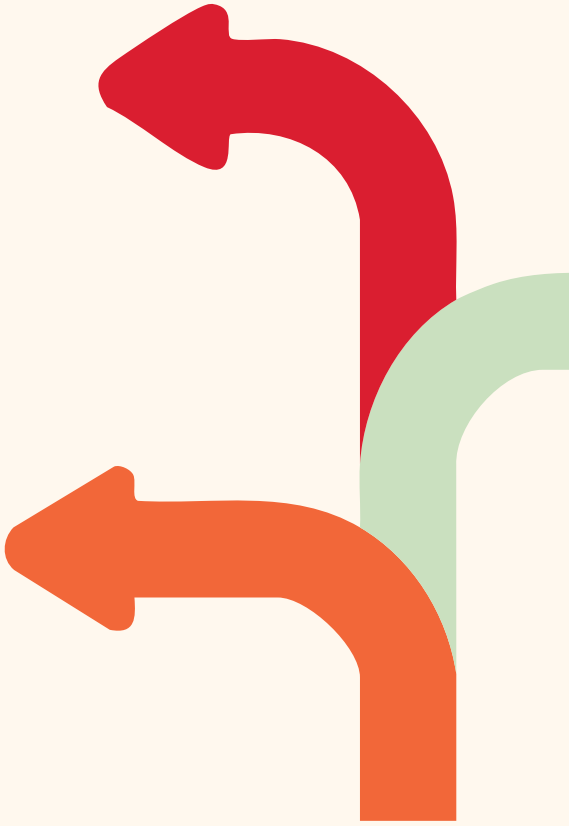
4 LONG-TERM INFLUENCE AND REACH (SYSTEM LEVEL)

Finally, we want this program to ripple outward-to contribute to long-term shifts in who leads and how leadership is practiced across the broader climate justice space. Feminist leadership should not remain siloed; it should spread. Over time, the program's tools, practices, and principles shared in the program should travel-adapted, translated, and applied by others far beyond the original participants.

Recognizing Outcomes What Success Looks Like

- Leaders articulate a systems-based and feminist critique of climate injustice
- Greater ability to spot false solutions
- Leaders reclaim rest, reflection, and ritual as radical practices
- Sharper movement memory and more consistent feminist tactics (e.g. carbon markets, top-down aid)
- Participants challenge extractive narratives and center community-defined priorities led by women and gender-diverse communities
- Leaders co-create strategic campaigns rooted in local and regional context
- Strengthened ability to facilitate meetings, resolve conflict, and inspire action
- Stronger, more empathetic movement culture
- Reduced isolation and cross-generational trust that helps groups weather conflict or political repression
- Leaders fund their work through mutual aid, coops, and shared infrastructure
- Tangible community impact (e.g. restored land, reforested areas, energy access)
- Increased credibility of leaders within their communities
- Evidence to make feminist climate work more fundable and visible

Exploring Pathways Cultivating Feminist Leadership



Two workplans were developed to reflect the diverse realities and capacities that AktivAsia may face as it reimagines its Feminist Leadership Development program for climate justice movements. These scenarios—(1) a full program led and implemented by AktivAsia, and (2) a co-created set of tools in partnership with a feminist organization—represent two distinct but equally strategic pathways toward strengthening feminist leadership in climate spaces.

The first scenario assumes that AktivAsia is ready to implement a comprehensive, multi-country program. It builds on existing relationships, tested facilitation methods, and a curriculum that has proven impactful across contexts. This option allows for greater control over content, pedagogy, and outcomes. It also offers deeper community engagement and opportunities for long-term leadership development among women and marginalized genders in climate movements.

The second scenario recognizes the value of collaboration and shared ownership. It is designed for a context where resources, staffing, or strategic priorities may call for a lighter-touch, co-created approach. In this model, AktivAsia works alongside a feminist partner to design tools that are then shared with climate justice organizations. This approach may be more feasible in settings with limited funding or when aiming to reach actors who are not yet part of feminist networks.

The choice between the two will depend on key criteria:

Organizational readiness – staff capacity, funding, and strategic clarity.
Partner landscape – availability of aligned feminist collaborators.
Political and movement contexts – urgency, receptivity, and safety for feminist organizing.
Scale and depth of impact desired – whether to go deeper with fewer groups or broader with many.

Ultimately, both pathways reflect feminist values of adaptability, relational practice, and power-sharing. The final decision will rest on where AktivAsia can be most impactful, sustainable, and accountable to the communities it serves.

PATHWAYS FOR FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Proposal 01

AktivAsia leads a full leadership development (FLD) program

This scenario centers AktivAsia developing and implementing leadership journey for climate justice actors, especially from frontline communities

Proposal 02

AktivAsia co-designs feminist leadership tools with a partner organization

This scenario centers on collaboration with a feminist org (e.g., JASS, FRIDA, or Pacific feminist network) to co-create shareable tools for climate justice organizers.

Relationship-Building

- Identify 1-2 potential feminist org partners
- Align on goals, roles, vlaues
- Agree on focus areas (e.g., political education, care infrastructure)

Tool Co-Creation

- Conduct co-creation workshops with regional activists
- Design 1-2 prototype tools (e.g., self-assessment guide, facilitation deck)

Feedback & Refinement

- Gather structured feedback from org piloting tools
- Revise the feminist accessibility and intersectionality in mind

Distribution & Learning

- Launch open-source resource kit
- Host community learning session/webinar
- Gather insights in how orgs are adapting tools

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

For a startup network like AktivAsia, success hinges on collaboration. AktivAsia should prioritize strategic partnerships that align with its feminist values, deepen regional reach, and amplify grassroots voices. Collaborating with feminist funders, Indigenous networks, and climate justice organizations can build political power, pool resources, and co-create tools—ensuring leadership development efforts are intersectional, multilingual, and grounded in community realities. Consider co-designing and co-implementing programs with:

PARTNER	CONTRIBUTION
JASS Southeast Asia	Political education & power analysis
ARROW	Sexual & reproductive health rights, feminist frameworks
Samdhana Institute	Community-based environmental defense & grants
APWLD	Regional movement-building & policy advocacy
Global Greengrants	Small grants & community philanthropy
Women's Funds (WFA, Mama Cash)	Feminist resourcing and flexible funding

THE RESOURCE LANDSCAPE

A central thread running through the insights of participants was the tension between **access and sustainability** in funding feminist leadership within climate justice. While many actors acknowledge that there is growing visibility and international interest in supporting women-led and feminist approaches, significant barriers still remain — particularly for grassroots and frontline leaders.

One respondent described how in international climate forums, rural women or women from less-resourced countries are often present only as observers, not negotiators. These spaces can become transformative, however, when women are supported to bring their local experiences, stories, and even interpreters, so that they can meaningfully participate.

“The exchange becomes powerful,” one shared, “because they foreground indigenous knowledge and speak for themselves.” Yet these opportunities are rare, often limited by economic, logistical, and cultural barriers—some women do not have access to basic travel needs like a phone or credit card, and rely on “handlers” to navigate the international space.

Respondents noted that intersectionality is often lacking in funding priorities. Upper-class or elite women may dominate representation, sometimes upholding patriarchal structures rather than challenging them. “Some women have bought into the patriarchy and benefit from it,” one person observed. As a result, funding that claims to be feminist can, in practice, fail to challenge inequity or reach those doing the most community-rooted work.

At the same time, a few feminist-aligned funds, like the Global Fund for Women, were highlighted as examples of promising practices — particularly their emphasis on flexible funding models that lower the burden on grassroots groups to apply or report. The best funding models, participants noted, build on long-term relationships and mutual accountability, not just transactional project outcomes. Respondents stressed the importance of models of co-funding and shared ownership, where local organizations are not just recipients but co-creators of agendas, particularly when working across borders. Programs like WELA (Women Leading on Climate), which attracted international trust funding and supported women’s advocacy at climate forums, were cited as impactful because they helped make women’s climate work visible and politically grounded.

Finally, funding for feminist leadership should be accessible, sustained, and genuinely intersectional. It should support the labor of care, language justice, and survivor-centered approaches. And critically, it must help carve space for cross-border solidarity — so that local knowledge can inform global strategies and vice versa. Effective partnerships and funding, in this view, must allow for personal, political, and community transformation — not just deliverables.

Current investments in feminist climate leadership remain extremely limited — despite rising global demands for equity-driven climate solutions. The figures below illustrate deep gaps and underscore the urgent need for funders to support feminist-led climate movements, particularly those led by grassroots, Indigenous, and gender-diverse communities.

Funding to Feminist Organizations

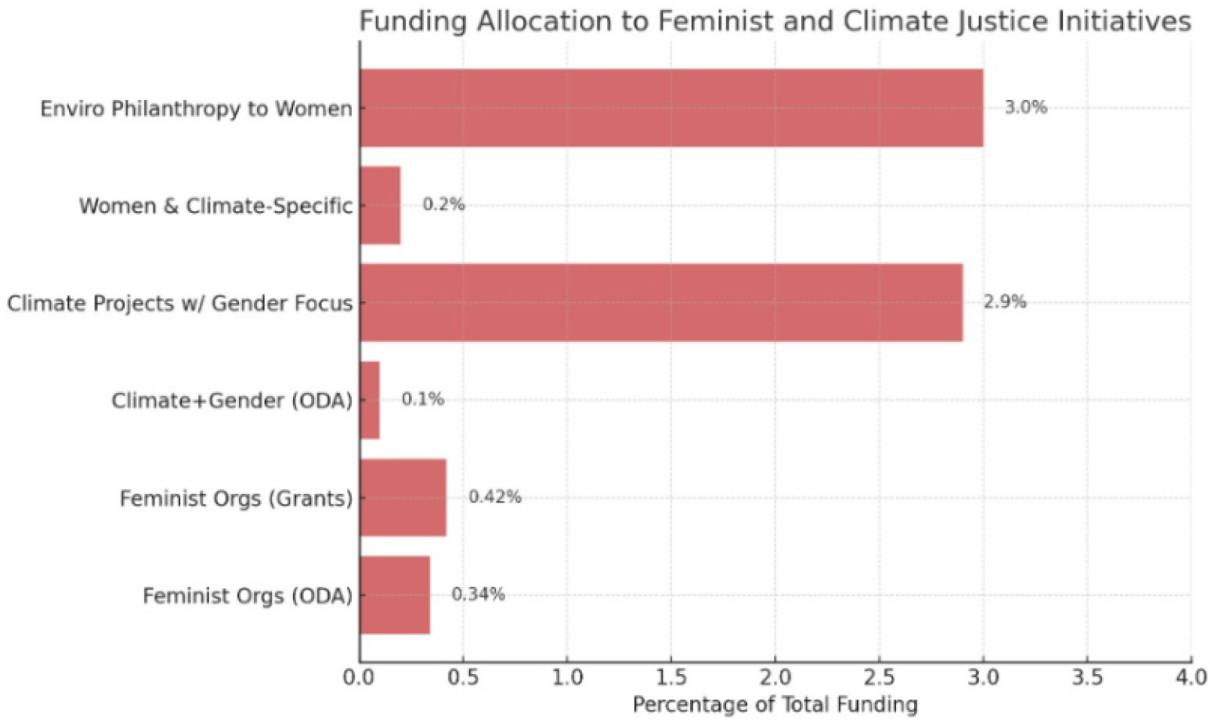
1 Women's rights organizations receive just **0.34% of bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA)** and **0.42% of foundation grants** globally
2 In the U.S., less than **2% of philanthropic giving** is directed to women and girls broadly.

Funding to Climate Organizations and Gender-Climate Projects

3 Among climate-related ODA, only **0.1%** goes to projects that prioritize both climate adaptation and gender as their principal objective.
4 In 2020, just **2.9% of climate-focused development finance** identified gender equality as a principal goal.

Funding to Feminist Climate Organizations

5 Only **0.2% of foundation funding** supports work explicitly focused on women and the environment, and **90% of climate philanthropy** goes to organizations led by men



AN INVITATION

Investing in feminist leadership development for climate justice movements is one of the most strategic and transformative actions funders can take to ensure just, sustainable, and community-led responses to the climate crisis. At the frontlines of climate change — whether responding to extractivism, food insecurity, displacement, or disaster recovery —women, Indigenous leaders, and marginalized genders are already organizing, often without adequate resources or recognition. What they need now is sustained investment in their leadership, not just to survive, but to shape the solutions.

AktivAsia's approach centers the lived knowledge and organizing power of these communities. Feminist leadership is not about training individuals in abstract concepts — it is about building collective power, redistributing decision-making, and ensuring those most impacted by climate injustice are the ones leading climate campaigns. Through healing-centered, locally rooted, and politically conscious leadership programs, we cultivate changemakers who hold intersectional analyses, who can navigate power, and who are accountable to their communities.

For funders, this is a high-impact opportunity to resource long-term systems change. Supporting feminist leadership does not just build capacity — it transforms movements. It creates the conditions for deeper cross-movement alliances, improves representation in global climate forums, and brings grounded, community-informed solutions to policy tables. Feminist leadership development strengthens civic space, supports inclusive governance, and advances equity alongside environmental action.

Now is the moment to match rhetoric with resources. With strategic partnerships, AktivAsia can grow a new generation of feminist climate leaders equipped to build a future that is just, resilient, and rooted in care.

Power Up Progress

New Investments in Climate Justice Movements Cultivating Feminist Leadership

Center Collective Power

Shift from individual-capacity building to models that build collective leadership and institutional support rooted in community and movement values.

Contextualize Content

Design flexible, multilingual curricula that are responsive to local climate realities and socio-political contexts.

Co-create with Feminist Partners

Partner with national and local feminist organizations to embed intersectional, decolonial, and care-centered practices in all stages of program design and delivery.

Commit to Continuity

Establish mentoring, peer exchange, and alumni networks to ensure continuity and sustained learning.

Endgame

A Contextually Rooted, Community Responsive Feminist Leadership Development Model

A new, context-responsive leadership development model will be piloted, centering feminist values of care, collective power, and community-rootedness. This approach shifts away from extractive, hierarchical training and toward models that build leadership with rather than for women from climate frontline communities.

"*You can't just say you're a feminist. It should be evident in how your community experiences it.*"
Regional leader, Philippines

An Interconnected Ecosystem of Feminist Climate Leaders

By investing in cohort-based and cross-movement learning, the program will cultivate a growing ecosystem of feminist climate justice organizers across Asia who share language, analysis, and strategies for collective action - equipped not only with skills but shared analysis, solidarity, and sustained cross-border collaboration.

"*Feminist and climate justice efforts often run in parallel but not together. There is a need to feminize environmental organizing*"
Women's Rights Organization Executive Director, Indonesia

Conclusion

We envision not just individual women leaders but a thriving ecosystem of feminist actors and institutions rooted in their communities, catalyzing cultural shifts and connected across borders. This approach offers a more enduring, decolonial, and justice-centered alternative -one that reflects both the urgency of the climate crisis and the collective power needed to address it.

Resources

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