

Climate and gender

Briefing for a new government



Climate change and gender

Briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group 2024

Summary

The climate emergency requires urgent action to transform our economy and society. Although climate change will impact on everyone on the planet, we know it is women who will experience the most acute effects. The climate emergency disproportionately impacts women because on average they are poorer than men, they have less savings, they are less financially resilient, and they often bear the brunt of economic crises compared to men. The climate emergency therefore amplifies and exacerbates existing gender inequalities. This briefing highlights key findings and recommendations from the work of the Women's Budget Group across several public sector areas on the intersection of climate change and gender.

Recommendations

- Prioritise public investments in decarbonisation and social infrastructure, particularly in the care sector, which can create more green jobs and reduce emissions compared to traditional industries like construction.
- Phase out fossil fuel subsidies and redirect funds towards renewable energy and green infrastructure.
- Introduce progressive taxation to fund climate initiatives and support social infrastructure, including health, care and education.
- Focus on housing as a key vehicle for climate action, promoting energy efficiency and social housing development to reduce emissions and improve living conditions. Implement a retrofitting plan to improve energy efficiency in existing homes and buildings.
- Expand public investment in renewable energy projects and green technologies. Introduce energy subsidies to support vulnerable households. Reform energy pricing to incentivise saving and transition away from fossil fuels.
- Invest in sustainable, accessible and affordable public transport infrastructure, particularly in underserved communities. Promote active green travel options like cycling and walking through infrastructure improvements and education. Address safety and accessibility concerns for women, disabled individuals, and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups in transport planning.
- Promote a green and caring labour market through equitable job creation, reskilling initiatives, and improved working conditions aligned with environmental sustainability and gender equality.

Addressing the climate emergency through a gender lens is crucial for building a fair and sustainable future. The UK must lead by example, acknowledging its historical responsibility and supporting global efforts towards climate justice through equitable policies and international cooperation.

In 2022, the Women's Budget Group and the Women's Environmental Network (WEN), presented the results of the "Feminist Green New Deal", a project including women's organisations as well as those working on environmental, racial and social justice issues to understand and shape policies that can help provide a clear roadmap to a sustainable and equal UK economy. This briefing presents the main ideas and recommendations from the final report¹, the messaging guide² and the policy papers³ that informed the project.

Introduction

The climate emergency requires urgent action to transform our economy and society. Global temperature has increased by at least 1.1°C since the late 19th century, mainly because of greenhouse gases from human activities⁴. One of the consequences is rising sea levels, which, in turn, increases the risk of flooding, causes erosion, increases the risk of displacement, and creates general damage to the ecosystem, among others⁵.

Although climate change is impacting everyone, we know some groups are more vulnerable than others. Women particularly are experiencing the most acute effects⁶.

In the UK, as elsewhere, women face greater barriers to financial security, earn less than men on average and are more likely to be heads of single-parent households than men, which makes them disproportionately vulnerable to the costs of

climate change. These could include inflated gas bills, rising food prices because of floods or droughts, paying for household repairs after a flood, or being unable to work on days their children's school is closed because of a heatwave.

Many women are aware of the interconnection between financial insecurity and the climate crisis. In a poll carried out last year by WBG and the polling company YouGov, women were significantly more likely to be concerned about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis than men. They were also more likely than men to say that the environment and climate change will be important to how they vote in the next election⁷.

Responding to both the economic and climate crises will require urgent action to transform our economy and society, ensuring gender equality is at the heart of strategies to tackle climate change. This includes a gendered response to extreme weather events and also committing to structural change in the economy and systemic change in our lives.

Phasing out the fossil fuel industry is a fundamental step in addressing the climate crisis and must be accompanied by investments in social infrastructure, creating essential jobs in health, care, and education.

These jobs will solve the existing crises in these sectors and address inequality by ensuring that everyone has access to the services they need to survive and thrive, while contributing to gender

¹ Women's Budget Group (2022) [A green and caring economy. Final report](#), by Rebekah Diski

² Women's Budget Group (2022) [A Green and Caring Economy: Key Messages Guide](#).

³ See [Seven policy papers towards a Feminist Green New Deal](#).

⁴ Nasa Earth Observatory. [Global temperatures](#).

⁵ IPCC (2019) [Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate](#).

⁶ United Nations (n.d.) [Why women are key to climate action](#)

⁷ Women's Budget Group (2023) [Not your average voter? How women will shape the general election](#).

equality. They will also offer meaningful work for those moving out of carbon-intensive sectors.

Women's Budget Group research shows that investment in the care sector could create 2.7 times as many jobs as the same investment in construction and produce 30% less greenhouse gas emissions⁸.

Social infrastructure jobs are green: the average health and care job produces 26 times less greenhouse gas than a manufacturing job, over 200 times less than an agriculture job and nearly 1,500 times less than a job in oil and gas⁹.

Macroeconomic policy for a green and caring economy¹⁰

Our current economic and financial system rewards the very activities responsible for the climate and inequality crises. From 2016 to 2020, the UK's five biggest banks provided £227 billion in fossil fuel finance¹¹. In the same period, the UK government provided £13.6 billion in subsidies to the oil and gas industry in the form of tax breaks and decommissioning relief¹². In 2021, the government committed over \$1 billion towards a climate-wrecking gas project in Mozambique, which, over its lifetime, could produce greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to the combined annual emissions of all 27 EU member states¹³.

We need to redesign macroeconomic policies in such a way they promote the transition towards a green and caring economy. This includes public investments in physical and social infrastructure, taxes to raise revenue and limit certain activities,

and subsidies to support areas of high social value.

Recommendations

- Public investment and public sector jobs focused on decarbonisation and care services must be central to the UK's fiscal strategy. Fiscal policies need to facilitate the transformation of polluting activities and encourage the contraction of sectors misaligned with Paris Agreement targets, such as fossil fuels, while promoting the growth of low environmental impact sectors that enhance quality of life, such as care.
- Low-carbon transport, green social housing, the creation of parks and green spaces and the caring economy should be the focus of a public investment strategy that will target both the decarbonisation of our physical infrastructure and the expansion of social infrastructure.
- The funding and financing of public investment and public sector jobs can rely on a combination of policies: (i) progressive taxation, wealth-related taxes, and energy windfall taxes, (ii) purchase of government bonds by the Bank of England within a new fiscal and monetary policy coordination institutional framework, (iii) the issuance of government bonds explicitly linked to the green and caring economy.

⁸ Women's Budget Group (2020) [A care-led recovery from coronavirus](#)

⁹ WBG analysis of ONS Emissions Inventory and Business Register and Employment Survey, 2019

¹⁰ Women's Budget Group (2022) [Macrofinancial policies for a green and caring economy](#), by Maria Nikolaidi

¹¹ Positive Money (2021) [Bank of England told to restrict fossil finance ahead of financial stability report](#)

¹² Paid to Pollute (2021) [UK has given £14bn in subsidies to oil and gas industry](#)

¹³ Friends of the Earth and New Economics Foundation (2021) [Tip of the iceberg: The future of fossil fuel extraction](#)

Housing¹⁴

Housing is fundamental to life, security, and well-being, but is also a key vehicle to tackling climate change and working towards a zero-carbon future. Carbon dioxide emissions from the residential sector, mainly from heating and cooking, represented 13% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the UK in 2023¹⁵.

The housing stock in the UK is particularly old¹⁶, which is not only a problem in terms of energy efficiency but also from a public health perspective. The groups who are most vulnerable to the physical and mental health harm caused by poor insulation and dampness tend to be the very groups who are necessarily spending most of their time at home: disabled people, older people, children, and caregivers (the majority of whom are women)¹⁷.

Housing also remains a key area of gender and intersectional inequalities, with mortgages and private rents out of financial reach for many marginal groups and a design that does not accommodate diverse accessibility needs or caring responsibilities¹⁸.

Women and marginalised groups are often priced out of buying or renting good quality housing.

Women are overrepresented amongst social renters, mainly because they are overrepresented among people on lower incomes, lone-parent households, and households about to become

homeless. In 2022/23, 41% of lone-parent households were social renters¹⁹.

Recommendations

We need a significant overhaul to ensure the right to safe, decent and affordable housing, prioritising housing as a home over an asset²⁰.

- The government must fund a significant social house building programme, devolving power to local authorities and communities to plan and build. New builds should use local and traditional building materials where possible, minimising the carbon footprint. They should be energy efficient, prioritising the use of renewable energy.
- New housing should support compact and connected communities close to services to encourage walking, cycling and public transport use.
- It is urgent to implement a retrofitting plan for the existing housing stock. Spending £35.6bn to upgrade seven million homes could save over 40 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions over four years, equivalent to the annual emissions of nine coal-fired power stations²¹. Retrofitting would drive down energy costs and provide hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Acknowledging the connections between the climate crisis and the housing crisis by investing in reducing housing's contribution to the UK's carbon footprint, housing the estimated 8 million

¹⁴ Women's Budget Group (2021) [Rethinking Housing Supply and Design](#), by Andrea Gibbons; Women's Budget Group (2022) [A green and caring economy. Final report](#), by Rebekah Diski.

¹⁵ Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (2024) [UK Greenhouse gas emissions 2023, provisional figures](#).

¹⁶ BRE Trust (2020) [The Housing Stock of the United Kingdom](#)

¹⁷ Women's Budget Group (2021) [Rethinking housing supply and design](#)

¹⁸ Gibbons, A., Women's Budget Group (2021) [Rethinking Housing Supply and Design](#) by Andrea Gibbons

¹⁹ DLUHC (2024) English Housing Survey: headline report 2022/23 [2022-23 EHS Headline Report Chapter 1 Profile of households and dwellings Annex Tables.ods \(live.com\)](#)

²⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on Housing (2020) [Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing](#)

²¹ New Economics Foundation (2020) [Green Stimulus for Housing](#) by D. Brown et al

people in need of secure and good condition housing, and reversing the rise of homelessness would transform lives, address the crisis and health inequalities, and improve landscapes²².

Energy

Energy is central to both the problem and the solution to the climate crisis. It's not just about the type of energy we use but also how we use it.

Using energy more efficiently and using cleaner energy reduces greenhouse gases and other air pollution.

However, structural inequalities apply to energy use - particularly in the context of heating, cooking, and basic daily activities. The recent unprecedented increases in energy bills brought into sharp relief the different ways households use energy and the disproportionate impact of higher energy bills on low-income households, because a large proportion of their income is spent on energy. People in low-income households have had to make impossible choices between eating and heating.

In 2022, 13% of households were in fuel poverty²³. Single parents, 88% of whom are women, are particularly likely to be in fuel poverty. In 2023, 28.8% of single-parent households were in fuel poverty, a significant increase from 18.9% in 2018²⁴. However, End Fuel Poverty predicts this number will likely be higher²⁵.

Disabled people and their carers face significant additional problems as a result of rising energy costs. On average, disabled households (with at

least one disabled adult or child) need an additional £1,122 per month in total to have the same standard of living as non-disabled households²⁶.

Recommendations

We need to address the current energy crisis and support individuals and families while taking us on a sustainable path to reduce energy consumption and move away from fossil fuels.

Targeted support that incentivises reduced consumption²⁷:

- **Variable tariffs** that would include a free²⁸ or heavily subsidised basic energy allowance for everyone, above which individuals would pay higher rates per energy unit.
- **Targeted support through social security** for people with higher energy demand, like disabled people and low-income large families (e.g. through an "energy element" in Universal Credit benefit and legacy benefits).

Increased energy efficiency in housing and commercial buildings:

- **Government investment in retrofitting** of homes and non-domestic buildings, including financing insulation efforts and greening of home heating systems (e.g. heat pump installation), with specific support to social and private renters.
- **Higher energy efficiency and zero-carbon targets for new builds**, with solar panels and heat pumps as the standard.

²² National Housing Federation (2020) [People in Housing Need: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Scale and Shape of Housing Need in England Today](#)

²³ Department for Energy Security & Net Zero (2024) [Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics in England 2024](#)

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ End Fuel Poverty (2022) [Children set to suffer as energy bills rocket](#)

²⁶ Scope (2023) [Disability Price Tag 2023: the extra cost of disability](#)

²⁷ In line with NEF's [energy proposal](#)

²⁸ A free basic energy allowance for everyone would be in line with the Universal Basic Services position of seeing energy as an essential that everyone should have access to regardless of ability to pay and which WBG broadly supports.

*Public ownership of the energy sector for a Green and Caring Economy*²⁹:

- **Create a state-owned renewable energy company** that would set attractive tariffs for consumers and invest in renewable energy, following the example of most other European countries.
- **Buy back the energy grid**, a natural monopoly responsible for energy distribution (which is already partly in train), to lead the way on the UK's net-zero efforts.
- **Remove the tax reliefs and allowances** that oil and gas companies like Shell and BP are allowed to claim. The additional tax revenue to be used to lower prices in the short term and support investment in renewables and insulation.
- **Reform wholesale energy market pricing**, to decouple price of electricity from the gas price (the highest unit cost of production at the moment) and so encourage consumers to move to renewable energy suppliers.

Transport³⁰

26% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions come from transport in 2021. Most (91%) of emissions from domestic transport came from road vehicles. Cars and taxis made up 52% of the emissions from domestic transport, with almost two-thirds coming from private cars³¹.

Switching to electric cars is one option, but these still use a lot of energy. Mining raw materials for batteries, manufacturing, and generating

electricity for electric vehicles produce emissions. The extraction of raw materials for batteries exacerbates global injustices, as consumers of electric vehicles mostly live in industrialised countries while raw materials are concentrated in countries in the Global South³².

Women, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups and disabled people are less likely to own a car and more likely to be dependent on public transport³³. 'Car-centric' policies and planning have created 'transport deserts,' where driving is the only practical form of transport due to absent or inadequate public transport, pavements and cycling infrastructure, and long distances needed to access services, opportunities and amenities³⁴.

The gendered division of domestic and caring responsibilities means women make more frequent, short journeys throughout the day, whereas men make fewer but longer journeys during peak hours. However, transport systems are designed around men's transport patterns to optimise peak-hour long distance radial journeys into city centres³⁵.

Women in England make a third more bus journeys than men, so they have been disproportionately impacted by bus deregulation and cuts to bus coverage³⁶. In addition, having fewer bus routes available or having to wait longer for a bus exposes women and girls to a greater risk of street harassment, which 86% of UK women have experienced in public spaces³⁷.

²⁹ These are in line with the [energy campaign demands](#) by We Own It

³⁰ Women's Budget Group (2021) [Towards Gender Inclusive and Sustainable Transport Systems](#) by Tiffany Lam

³¹ Department for Transport (2023) [Transport and environment statistics: 2023](#)

³² UNCTAD (2020) [Commodities At A Glance: Special issue on strategic battery raw materials](#)

³³ Women's Budget Group (2021) [Towards Gender Inclusive and Sustainable Transport Systems](#) by Tiffany Lam

³⁴ CPRE (2021) [Every village, every hour 2021 buses report](#)

³⁵ Women's Budget Group (2021) [Towards Gender Inclusive and Sustainable Transport Systems](#) by Tiffany Lam

³⁶ Department for Transport (2020) [Mode of Travel Statistical Data Set, NTS0601](#)

³⁷ AAPG – UN Women (2021) [Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces](#)

Disabled and older people also disproportionately use buses, so limited bus routes can increase their isolation and make it harder for them to access essential services.

Fear of street harassment and inaccessible cycling infrastructure can exacerbate concerns about road safety and deter underrepresented groups from cycling. In UK cities, men are over twice as likely to cycle as women, with ethnic minority women least likely to cycle³⁸.

Recommendations

An inclusive green transport system would invest massively in widespread, accessible and affordable, if not free, public transport. We need an expanded, more frequent, electrified bus network. Public ownership can improve public transport routes, service reliability, affordability, and accessibility. Active travel design must involve underserved communities to ensure that infrastructure is fairly distributed. It should be accompanied by education, outreach, and peer support to promote cycling among underrepresented groups. It must be adapted for disabled people as much as possible and must not obstruct or stigmatise disabled people who need to drive or be driven.

Labour market changes for a green and caring economy³⁹

One central aspect of transitioning to a green and caring economy will be greening the labour market. The conversation around 'green jobs' usually focuses on the need for more well-paid jobs in green technology sectors that employ many more men than women. Women make up

just 18% of employees in offshore wind⁴⁰ and 21% in transport⁴¹. On the other hand, women are over-represented in jobs in health, education, and care, which are socially vital and do not produce large quantities of greenhouse gas emissions. However, jobs in these sectors even though they are environment-friendly and essential tend to be low-paid and are often insecure which makes it hard to attract workers and fill vacancies (e.g. 32% of care workers in the adult social care sector are on zero-hours contracts⁴²).

Economic sectors and the UK labour market must adapt to transition to a green and caring economy. This will involve implementing new processes within industries to make them more sustainable or reorienting activities, such as green financial investing. Changes to the labour market are likely to have gendered impacts because women and men are concentrated in different economic sectors and have different employment patterns. Solutions must take these differences into account so that a green economy is also a more gender-equal one.

We also need to see an expansion of low-carbon sectors that promote well-being, such as the care sector, and a contraction of others, like the fossil fuel industry.

Recommendations

Alongside sectoral changes we need changes in the nature of employment across the board, aligned with a green and caring economy:

- **Working conditions and employment culture.** Green job creation must exist within a set of wider policies that protect

³⁸ Sustrans (2019) [Bike Life: Cities for people](#)

³⁹ Women's Budget Group (2022) [Labour market changes for a green and caring economy](#).

⁴⁰ Green Jobs Taskforce (2021) [Report to Government, Industry and the Skills Sector](#).

⁴¹ Women's Budget Group (2021) [Towards Gender-Inclusive and Sustainable Transport Systems](#) by Tiffany Lam

⁴² Skills for care (2023) [The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England](#).

the well-being of the worker and the environment, and work towards a gender-equal economy. This includes protections such as improved parental leave, flexible working hours, a robust social security system, a shorter working week, cooperative models which enable collective worker ownership, and improved work/life balance.

- **Reskilling and diversity.** A green and caring labour market integrating different groups in all sectors will require improved and inclusive education and training, particularly to encourage women and minority groups into STEM sectors.
- More people will be brought into the care sector by greater public investment to revalue care workers, enabling better pay, working conditions and career development.
- The just transition should provide appropriate reskilling and upskilling focused on those who might become unemployed due to the decline in high-carbon activities.

Supporting a global green and caring economy⁴³

The changes described above apply mainly to the UK. However, the climate, ecological and inequality crises are global in nature and require a global solution. We are deeply connected to the rest of the world through trade, finance, energy,

and migration networks, all of which must be reorganised around a green and caring economy.

Women, minoritised groups, and disabled people, who are least to blame for current crises, face the brunt of climate breakdown. They are most vulnerable to policies that don't consider climate justice. The UK has contributed significantly to global inequality and environmental damage; hence, it has a greater responsibility to address these impacts.

Accounting for historical greenhouse gas emissions, the UK is the 8th largest contributor to global emissions, although this is an underestimate, based on territorial emissions and excluding those for which the UK was responsible as a colonial power and those embodied in imported goods⁴⁴.

Taking a "fair share" approach would mean the UK taking much faster action to decarbonise our own economy while supporting poorer countries with climate finance and technology transfers to help them mitigate further climate damage, deal with existing impacts, and address inequality⁴⁵.

Women leaders are already pushing for gender-just transitions in key sectors, such as sustainable energy in Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda, as well as nature-friendly farming in Brazil, Cuba, and Nicaragua⁴⁶.

The UK should use its position in trade⁴⁷, finance and diplomatic relations to push for a reordering of the global economy around reparative climate justice, for example, through debt relief, reforming international financial institutions, clamping down

⁴³ Women's Budget Group (2022) [A green and caring economy. Final report](#), by Rebekah Diski

⁴⁴ Carbon Brief (2021) [Which countries are historically responsible for climate change?](#)

⁴⁵ Christian Aid (2020) [The UK's climate fair share to limit global warming to 1.5C](#)

⁴⁶ UN Women (2021) [Beyond Covid-19: A feminist plan for sustainability and social justice](#)

⁴⁷ More details in "[Trade and investment: briefing for a new government](#)" Women's Budget Group (2024)

on tax havens and ending exploitative treaties such as the Energy Charter Treaty⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ The Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) is a corporate court agreement that allows fossil fuel companies to sue governments outside the national legal system for taking climate action that might threaten their investments. The

poorest countries, most vulnerable to climate change impacts, are also least able to pay the billions for which they might be liable in a ECT lawsuit.

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