

**Girls for Climate: Making Policy Accessible**

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April 22, 2022



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### **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, we would like to thank Dr. Saôde Savary from the Voices Of Olympia Canada Organization for giving us the incredible opportunity to participate in this project. Next, we would like to extend our gratitude to our interviewees for the invaluable contributions they provided and their interest in Girls for Climate: Stephanie Henry King, Phaedra de Saint-Rome, Caroline Merner, Iliana Irons, Victoria Sandre, Julie Delisle, and Marina Gosselin. We are thankful for all the support we received on behalf of Mr. Stéphane Poupart, our Director of Educational Services. A big thank-you as well to Villa Maria sciences teacher Ms. Ashley O'Grady and Secondary Two student Alexia Baptista for taking the time to help us with our video, along with English teacher Ms. Anna Gagliardi for her constant encouragement. Finally, we would like to thank our advising teachers Ms. Giulia Bartolone and Ms. Kristian Petrakos for selecting us, guiding us through every hurdle we encountered, and for believing in us. We are forever grateful, and none of this could have been possible without you.

### **Abstract**

An analysis of the current state of climate change forces the international community to face two brutal truths: the impact of climate change is threatening and ever-present, and those who are facing the brunt of climate change—women—are the least represented among the people making the decisions and policies to stop it. Peer-reviewed academic sources informed our project, wherein we conducted several interviews with specialists in politics, policy, and climate. Through a quantitative survey, we deduced that women in positions of power are integral to combating climate change as a global issue. We concluded that education is the key to girls' empowerment. When young girls are given the tools and knowledge needed to prosper they can make an impact. For this reason, we have created an accessible and interactive learning platform: Girls for Climate. Through our website, girls can watch short video capsules of women in the climate and policy space, share their knowledge, and become more engaged and empowered in their communities.

*Keywords:* climate change, policy, women, girls, global citizenship, grassroots activism, accessible, education, community

## Literature Review

### A. Academic Research

#### Climate Change

In order to confront a vast issue such as climate change, it is imperative to first define it. According to the European Environment Agency (2017), climate change “refers to any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity.” The term *anthropogenic* attributes the cause of climate change to human activity, specifically greenhouse gas emissions. While natural changes in the earth’s climate have been affecting worldwide ecosystems for billions of years, anthropogenic climate change has soared exponentially since the second Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, resulting in 1.1°C of warming in the last hundred years or so (IPCC, 2021). Although a global temperature rise of one degree may seem insignificant compared to the benefits of industrialization, the effects will be catastrophic. Extreme heat waves, floods, storms, and loss of Arctic ice, to say nothing of the displacement these natural disasters cause, are just some instances. Changes in precipitation and increases in carbon dioxide have still more ramifications on the agriculture industry, reducing the nutritional value of crops and harming the harvesting process (IPCC, 2019). This will then contribute to food insecurity around the globe. To stop the worst of these consequences before it is too late, the international community cannot rely solely on individual measures, such as using electric vehicles or consuming less meat. Government action is required to implement vital policy—achieving net-zero carbon emissions, for example—that will change the course of climate change, and by extension human history, for the better.

*Women in Politics and Climate Change*

When looking at climate change policy through the lens of gender, extensive research suggests two opposing ideas: despite the fact that women politicians are needed in order for climate change-related decisions to be made effectively, there is a striking lack of representation of women in the field of climate change policymaking. Maviskalyan and Tarverdi (2018) of Curtin University extensively document the link between the number of women in positions of political power versus the “stringency” of that country’s climate action plans in their paper. According to this source, that correlation is positive. The authors suggest that “females have greater awareness and concern about climate change than males do”—a phenomenon they link to the fact that “values relevant for climate change action [...] are more emphasized in females than in males” through the process of gender socialization. Additionally, the paper states that since left-leaning governments tend to both appoint more women in their parliament and have more ambitious climate plans, this could also be another cause for this connection. Lastly, the research not only shows an increase in the rigour of climate action plans but also a decrease in carbon emissions in countries with more political representation for women (p. 2).

Osman-Elsha (n.d.) argues that women are more likely to be negatively affected by the consequences of climate change than men due to their dependence on natural resources, among other social factors. A report from the International Labour Organization (2009) states that “women tend to play a greater role than men in natural resource management – farming, planting, protecting and caring for seedlings and small trees – and in ensuring nutrition and as care providers for their families” (p. 1). Despite this proven association, the reality remains that women leaders are not taking up enough space in climate change policymaking. Tanyag’s (2021) article for *The*

*Guardian* focuses on the lack of women, especially women of colour, in high-profile climate change summits, namely COP26. As stated by Tanyag,

“[g]lobally, only 26 women serve as heads of government and state. At the last COP summit, held in 2019, approximately 80% or 155 of the 196 heads of delegation were men. Progress has been made to increase women’s participation in COP events, but gender parity in climate leadership is estimated to be achieved only in 2068.”

Not only are women represented in fewer numbers, but they also tend to speak less than men (UNFCCC, 2021, p. 11). In addition to this disparity, women were often left out of core positions during COP26 and were instead relegated to roles such as event organizers (Chiu, 2021). At a time when women are already being displaced from their homes, comprising 80% of climate refugees, because of the rapidly intensifying effects of climate change, this research applies to the project by demonstrating the great necessity for women’s representation in climate policy (WECAN, n.d.).

### *Girls’ Education*

Education plays a pivotal role in human development. Kristof et al. 's (2009) research revealed, when girls have access to education, they become empowered. This argument is corroborated by Sims (2021). Their article suggests that girls' secondary education is important to minimize vulnerability in response to climate disasters and extreme weather conditions. Sims refers to a study conducted by Streissnig et al. (2013), which “[estimates] that by 2050, deaths due to natural extreme events in sub-Saharan Africa could be reduced by 60% if 70% of women aged 20–39 years completed lower secondary school” (p. 9). It establishes that education gives women the knowledge and resources needed to improve problem-solving skills, critical thinking and disaster preparedness. Research suggests that education not only plays a role in mitigating the effects of climate disasters but also in empowering women to act in policymaking. There is a

growing body of evidence that supports the idea that the lack of women in decision-making positions in regards to climate is caused by a lack of education. A report by Kwauk and Braga (2017) highlights that a systematic approach in building knowledge and early learning is missing to encourage girls to create concrete change. There is a direct correlation between building women's skills and knowledge in order to further their impact on a political scale. Further research from this article suggests that "in just seven years of the fund's efforts, and in conjunction with other gender equality advocacy efforts within the climate sector, the number of women delegates representing their countries at UNFCCC meetings increased from 31 percent to 35 percent" (p. 30).

Despite the growing body of research that highlights the link between girls' education and policy, the conversation around environmental health in the classroom and in schools' curricula is lacking. Kelseman et al. (2011) support that implementing a deep understanding of these concepts allows for a better grasp of the subject. Students should not only be taught about climate change but should become immersed in the topic. This allows for a more comprehensive foundation of knowledge that can lead to more informed decision-making. This research is relevant for our project because it demonstrates how influential education can be in empowering girls and women on climate and policy. Equipping girls with this knowledge in an accessible way, such as an interactive online platform, can further lead them to participate and get involved in the climate discussion, and provide them with the needed skills to be able to respond to the ongoing environmental crisis.



### Peer Teaching and Peer Influence

When dissecting the aspects of climate change and policymaking, research favouring that peer influence and peer teaching play a crucial role in the development of students, especially in girls. Tullis and Goldstone's (2020) study found that when students have discussions with their peers, they learn with and from them. This low-stakes learning environment builds confidence in learners and improves their overall results. This paper examines the importance of classroom discussion, and how it increases "... [accuracy] and [confidence] after discussion with their peers" (p.2). Furthermore, a study developed by Cortright, Collins, and DiCarlo (2005), proposes that peer instruction enhances the learning ability of students. The study demonstrates how "meaningful learning occurs when the learner interprets, relates, and incorporates new information with existing knowledge and applies the new information to solve problems" (Cortright et al., 2005). Meaningful learning requires multiple opportunities for the student to be actively engaged in the reasoning and application of concepts. Inevitably, peer instruction enhances exam performance as well as student retention of previously learned information. These findings are reinforced in the work carried out by St. John and Briel (2017). This research supports our hypothesis of how peer influence can empower girls and women on climate change and policymaking. Creating platforms where students can share their knowledge is important for the development of learning in teens, and more importantly, in girls.

### Global Citizenship

We have always had driving factors that connected us all in our communities, whether it was for religion, language, situation, or culture, to name a few. After the last few decades, we see even more of these cases, especially in regard to the climate crisis. In these instances, individuals act as citizens of a larger community or the world itself, and apply shared morals and values to

building a future that is beneficial for all. That is why Canadian boards of education voice that global citizenship is imperative to approaching world problems. It aims for universal ethics and encourages people to work together to build a harmonious world. This, in turn, helped and still helps shape our needs economically, politically, religiously and socially (EF Academy, 2022). Understandably, global issues such as humanitarian crises, environmental crises, financial crises, and so forth, can only be solved using global citizenship. Starting with education, the more evolved our understanding is of other cultures, values, societies, and problems the smarter and mutually beneficial solutions will be. The second point of global citizenship is taking action. If it is taught in schools or at home, this seemingly small change in education and problem-solving will “Empower learners to engage and assume active roles, both locally and globally, to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world” (UNESCO, 2022, p.1). With research in mind, we concluded that our website, Girls For Climate, should provide information and knowledge on the global issue at hand, and offer opportunities for women to take on leadership roles for initiatives and be active in their communities. This will offer girls both criteria to act as global citizens in their communities.

## B. Community Outreach

### *Women in Politics: Stephanie Henry King*

When seeking ways to empower women and girls within their communities, research cannot simply start and end with academia—the emphasis should be placed on the knowledge that resides in experts working in those same communities. Stephanie Henry King, a municipal city councillor candidate for the Mouvement Montreal party, is one such expert. An interview with Ms. Henry King, who graduated from Concordia University with a degree in Political Science before

eventually pursuing the public service field under the leadership of mayoral candidate Balarama Holness, revealed the intricacies behind municipal politics and campaigning. One aspect she cited was the emergence of ‘green gentrification,’ wherein green spaces are added to disadvantaged neighbourhoods without any thought to the benefit of those actually living there. In addition to this, Ms. Henry King spoke about what the city government can do to combat climate change, as well as the effects of one of its major consequences—food insecurity—on her borough of Little Burgundy. She also highlighted the importance of girls and women, especially those of colour or from other marginalized groups, being involved in politics and policymaking. Due to her extensive knowledge, Stephanie Henry King will be featured on the website created for this project in a video capsule explaining the above in an accessible and engaging manner. This will no doubt aid in encouraging more girls to follow the path of politics in the future. Ms. Henry King suggested girls could break into the political field by “volunteering at local centres” and “being involved in community activism,” (Henry King, personal communication, November 28 2021), a process the website aims to facilitate.

### *Women in Politics: Phaedra de Saint-Rome*

In order to further understand the inner workings of what goes into policy, we interviewed Phaedra de Saint Rome, who is a graduate student at McGill’s Max Bell School of Public Policy. She has worked as a staffer on Parliament Hill, and in the United Nations Environment Program. She has also founded her own political media organization called “So What Media.” In our interview, Ms. de Saint Rome discussed the importance of understanding what goes into policymaking and its lengthy process. She also highlighted the importance of connecting youth with people in decision-making positions in order to grant youth access to these spaces. Ms. de Saint Rome emphasized the importance of having women in positions of power, as it creates much-

needed diversity and inclusion in policymaking. She added that “it’s always good to have diverse voices at the table. Not just in terms of gender, but also in terms of ethnicity, and religion. You end up building a more comprehensive piece of legislation” (De Saint Rome, personal communication, November 25 2021). Ms. de Saint Rome’s insightful perspective on policy has provided us with a deeper understanding of the subject; she will be featured in a video capsule on our website to educate girls, and further engage them on the topic.

*Women in Climate Science: Illiana Irons*

A scientific perspective on climate change was also integral to our project. One of our advising teachers, Ms. Petrakos, introduced us to Illiana Irons, who is a physical science officer at Environment and Climate Change Canada. Ms. Irons holds a Bachelor’s of Science degree with a major in Environment from McGill University and a Master’s of Resource and Environmental Studies degree from Dalhousie University. Following her Bachelor’s degree, she worked as a purchaser at Lufa Farms, a company aiming to make food systems more sustainable, before assuming her current career at ECCC. In her video capsule, Ms. Irons explained the rudiments of climate science. In particular, she noted the specific issue of *anthropogenic* climate change, and what girls can do to prevent, mitigate, or adapt to its impacts. Some examples she included were taking public or active (biking, walking) transportation, being aware of energy consumption, and staying mindful about reducing, reusing, and recycling. Additionally, Ms. Irons spoke to how important it is for girls to be role models for others in both remaining eco-conscious and advocating for gender equality, citing the disproportionate impact of climate change on women. Overall, her contributions to building girls’ knowledge of the actualities of climate and environmental science, as well as tangible ways they can do their part, were vital to the creation of our website (Irons, personal communication, March 1 2022).

*Women in Climate Activism: Caroline Merner*

Global citizenship is an important theme in regards to our project. We spoke to Caroline Merner, a climate and nature advocate, in order to gain perspective on this topic. Caroline addressed global citizenship and how important it is to be active in our communities. She stated that “global citizenship is also about using your opportunities to create privilege for others.” Being one of the creators of Youth4Nature, a non profit organization which “has the goal of engaging young people in mobilizing solutions for nature and climate.” Ms. Merner also discussed the significance of including youth, specifically girls, in the climate discussion. She stated that it will take all of us, a comprehensive society, to tackle this issue, and young people can get involved simply by taking what they are good at doing, and what they are passionate about, and applying it to make a difference in the world around them (Merner, personal communication, February 27 2022).

*Women in Climate Activism: Julie Delisle and Marina Gosselin*

When discussing climate policy and activism, it is essential to gain Indigenous perspectives on the issue. Indigenous peoples all over the world inhabited the land sustainably for centuries before colonization, and have much to offer in terms of educating the international community about environmental stewardship. We were fortunate enough to meet with Julie Delisle and Marina Gosselin, Environmental Education Liaison and Environmental Project Coordinator respectively at Kahnawake Environment Protection Office. We spoke about both women’s roles at KEPO and the importance of grassroots activism in combating climate change, especially within First Nations communities. According to Ms. Delisle, Indigenous women are already at the forefront of climate and environment-related protests but do not have enough real power at the legislative level. She also explained how vital it is to educate young girls on climate since many Indigenous cultures are

matrilineal and their knowledge is passed down by the women in their families. Furthermore, Ms. Delisle and Ms. Gosselin noted the fact that so much of the Kanien'kéha language is intrinsically tied to the environment; therefore, issues like climate change impact their daily lives in ways that non-Indigenous communities could not begin to understand. One solution they offered was to encourage more Indigenous women to pursue careers in STEM or policy-related fields, which we hope to accomplish with our website (Delisle and Gosselin, personal communication, March 18 2022).

### **Research Question**

In today's post-industrial world, climate change has become the most pressing issue facing the international community, since its effects pose an existential threat to the fate of humanity. We are at a precipice: governments promise ambitious proposals but do not truly take any concrete action. Yet those who stand to suffer the most from the effects of climate change are not typically those making the decisions (Orlove et al, 2020); rather, they are largely vulnerable and working-class women around the world. Due to their assigned roles as caretakers and providers, and the fact that they make up the majority of the global impoverished population, women experience the consequences of climate change, such as food insecurity and health issues, at a far greater level than men (Osman-Elasha, n.d.). A report from RTI International (2014) highlights that "approximately half of all households with food insecure children are headed by single women" (p. 19). In addition, women spend more of their income on food than men do, suggesting that the former are considered responsible for food security in their families (The International Food Policy Research Institute, 1995, p. 9). Research shows that lending women's perspectives to the political sphere would increase the sensibility of climate change policy toward its disproportionate effect on women (Mavisakalyan & Tarverdi, 2018). However, as the numbers have shown time and time

again, women remain only a negligible percentage of those responsible for climate-related decisions (Tanyag, 2021). Considering the fact that women are more heavily impacted by the effects of climate change, we believe it is essential that women are a part of the decision-making process, as demonstrated by the successful efforts of women policymakers and the climate action plans they pioneer. Through seeking opportunities for women to be more involved in climate change policy, we hope to empower women across Canada with an effective space to be heard when dealing with this urgent issue.

We hypothesize that a concrete solution needs to be reached in order to engage all women and girls in politics *and* to ensure policies are created with women in mind within the context of climate change. Through extensive research and interviews with several leading women in this field, we aim to create an interactive, innovative, and accessible online platform. This will give voice to women and girls in our community and shine a light on the absence of women in climate decision-making. Our essay will outline the effects of this serious environmental matter in Canada, the involvement of women and girls in policy-making, and the positive effects of grassroots activism, peer teaching and civic engagement. Using our online platform, we will get to the root of the issue of the gender gap in the politics of environmental changes. We are determined to encourage and support women by giving them the knowledge and tools they need to be a part of the future in the fight against climate change.

### **Methodology**

Our project relied on both qualitative and quantitative research. We began by consulting peer-reviewed, academic sources to propel our investigation into girls' level of engagement in climate change policy in Canada. The preliminary issue we explored leading up to our research question was the lack of women in decision-making positions regarding climate. In addition,

through research and interviews, we explored the impact women have when they are involved in this process. To inform how we developed our solution, we focused on subjects such as peer teaching, girls' education, and global citizenship. Seeing as this project places great importance on community involvement, it was also pivotal to conduct interviews with experts in their respective fields, such as policy and climate science. We interviewed several women in the field who shared their experience and expertise in an accessible manner. We contacted Stephanie Henry King, a Villa Maria alumna and Mouvement Montréal municipal candidate, and she offered her insights on our research question from a political perspective. Phaedra de Saint Rome, who spoke to girls at Villa Maria in 2019 about her career in policy, kindly returned to share her new experiences and perspectives as a Junior Policy Analyst at Global Affairs Canada. In the field of climate science, we spoke with Iliana Irons, a physical science officer at Environment and Climate Change Canada, who also referred us to her colleague Victoria Sandre at Natural Resources Canada. With regards to the intersection of both spheres, Caroline Merner, the co-founder and global ambassador for Youth4Nature, explained how girls can get involved in climate activism. In addition, Julie Delisle and Marina Gosselin, both at the Kahnawake Environment Protection Office, graciously lent an Indigenous perspective to the climate crisis and provided us with invaluable information. Finally, with the goal of confirming the lack of literacy on climate science and the political process, we created a survey targeted at Villa Maria's student body to assess their understanding of these issues.

Using academic research, interviews with community leaders, as well as quantitative data from our survey, we developed a website to help equip girls with the tools they need to become active policymakers. Our website includes video capsules from experts in policymaking, climate science, and activism. Each capsule includes interactive assignments, such as reflection questions and turnkey in-class activities. These modules were created by girls for girls to bridge the gap



identified in our research question. The research demonstrates that women make productive and inspired leaders in climate policy but need to be given access to both information and opportunities to achieve this. Around the globe, there are still several major obstacles to girls' education, such as "poverty, child marriage, and gender-based violence" as well as a lack of acceptable hygiene conditions in schools and gender-exclusive teaching (UNICEF, n.d.). When girls see themselves reflected in positions of power, they are more inclined to access those spaces. Overall, we hypothesized that with this design, we would be able to educate and empower girls into following the path of climate policy.

### **Solution**

Our solution addresses the gender gap in climate-related politics. We believe that educating women in politics and climate change will empower the young women of today to be the leaders of tomorrow. This is the genesis of the website Girls For Climate. On this platform, girls across Canada can learn to take action. The website is divided into two sections: 'Learn' and 'Act'. The 'Learn' page includes three video modules that will inform users on policy and policymaking, climate change, and the intersection of both<sup>1</sup>. After each module, there are a series of student-created resources such as reflection activities and questions to consolidate their understanding. The 'Act' page offers several opportunities for girls to put theory into practice by actively engaging in their communities. It includes an interactive map with several local and national organizations, such as WILD Outside and Youth4Nature, that girls can get involved with and support. Once the 'Learn' and 'Act' sections are complete through a self-guided process, we implore girls to share their learnings in class or as extracurricular activities. As we will not be monitoring student progress, we hope the resources our website offers will springboard into further involvement in

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<sup>1</sup>The women included in these capsules thus far are Stephanie Henry King, Phaedra de Saint-Rome, Caroline Merner, Iliana Irons, Victoria Sandre, Julie Delisle, and Marina Gosselin.

the climate action sphere. The platform we created aims to propel young women into climate policy as knowledgeable and devoted future leaders.

### **Conclusion**

This paper echoes what scientists all over the world have been predicting for decades: that the effects of climate change, if nothing is done, will be devastating. However, our research includes an additional nuance—that of the consequence on at-risk women from countries in the Global South, and, closer to Canada, Indigenous communities, which will bear the brunt of the natural disasters, health hazards, and food insecurity caused by climate change. For these reasons, we are of the opinion that women’s contributions are invaluable to each and every climate policy decision made in Canada. Despite the proven link between the number of women in politics and the efficacy of ensuing climate action plans, men still make up the majority of climate policy positions. Furthermore, we examined the correlation between girls’ education and their future endeavours in the legislative and scientific fields, and found that this relationship is, in fact, directly proportional: the more access to education a girl receives, the greater her impact on the world will be. We hope our website will kindle an interest in girls to pursue policy, and offer them a map for opportunities they can take part in to foster this passion. In addition, the ways in which girls learn are almost as vital as their education itself. Backed by academic research on the subject, we believe peer teaching creates a supportive environment conducive to building confidence and learning. Finally, global citizenship—the belief that one’s identity and responsibilities transcend borders—is the key to encouraging girls and women to pursue both science and politics, in order to make their mark in the field of climate change prevention and adaptation. Though some may argue that the gender of a policymaker should not have any effect on their decisions, and that including women in political positions simply for the sake of including them does not in and of itself solve

the issue, girls and women globally are already the faces of the climate movement—all they need is a platform through which to create transformative change. We invite you to imagine what women are capable of if only given the opportunity.

A preliminary version of the website can be found at: <https://vooc93.wixsite.com/girlsforclimate>

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