

Patriarchy, Backlash and Climate Justice

A Conversation Across Madagascar, Uganda, and Bangladesh

Webinar 2 of 3 | MenEngage Working Group on Environmental and Climate Justice

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Moderated by: Aruba Faruque Deputy Executive Coordinator, YouthNet Global, Bangladesh

Speakers: Nomena Liantsoa Rafanoharana (TI-Madagascar) Kayinga Muddu Yisito (COTFONE, Uganda)

"Don't start with (lecturing on) gender. Start with what men are already committed (to gender justice). Men who are already in the climate movement have existing values and understanding of responsibility, protection, community survival. Of care. Connecting gender justice to those values creates internal motivation, because external organizing can open doors, but it is the men, the community members themselves, who walk through these doors."

Nomena Liantsoa Rafanoharana · Environmental Project Officer, TI-Madagascar

Why Gender and Climate Cannot Be Separated

Aruba Faruque, 19 years old and six years into her life as a climate and environmental activist in Bangladesh, opened the session by asking the presenters to reflect on how the climate crisis is not a neutral phenomenon? In what ways does it affect people differently depending on who you are, where you live, and what power you hold?

Liantsoa, steering committee of MenEngage Madagascar, spoke about climate governance there rooted in her experience as the Environmental Project Officer at Transparency International, Madagascar. Liantsoa shared on how in February 2026 alone, Cyclone Gezani struck Toamasina in particular where 32 people have been reported dead, over 80% of its infrastructure was destroyed and displaced 257,000 people. Two weeks later, another cyclone hit the northwest. "These threats are not abstract," she said. "They are lived every season by millions of people."

Liantsoa continued, "when we talk about climate change in Madagascar, we need to understand that its impacts are not neutral. They are deeply gendered." Women manage water, food, and fuel for their households, which are resources that climate change makes unpredictable and scarce. And yet, despite being the primary managers of these resources, they are systematically excluded from the spaces where decisions about those resources are made. Women represent less than 30% of decision-makers in climate-related processes globally, she noted, and the figure is often far lower at the local level in Madagascar.

"Climate change doesn't just create new problems, it amplifies existing inequalities. Women have less access to land, to financial resources, and to information. When climate shocks happen, they hit women harder, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability and inequality."

— **Nomena Liantsoa Rafanoharana**

Kayinga, a human rights defender and community organizer from Uganda's central region with over 20 years of experience, picked up where Liantsoa left off, adding a layer of urgency specific to East Africa. His work at the intersection of environmental protection and social justice has made him a target. He has opposed the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), which will cut through Uganda and Tanzania, displacing communities that live along Lake Victoria which is a water source for over 40 million people. Because of that opposition, in 2022, his offices and home were raided by armed individuals and he has received death threats.

But before he got to his own story, he described what patriarchy and climate change do together to girls in Uganda: "As climate-induced crop failures reduce household incomes, families prioritize boys' education. Girls are pulled out of school first for domestic labor, for early marriage, for fetching water and firewood that climate change has made scarcer." It is estimated that only 53% of girls aged 6 to 12 complete primary education in Uganda. The climate crisis and gender inequality are not parallel problems, he argued. They are one problem, and men need to step up to change this.

The Entry Point: Don't Start With Gender

One of the most generative moments of the session came when a participant asked about a phrase that had appeared in TI-Madagascar's slide deck: "Don't start with gender. Start with what men are already committed to."

It sounds counterintuitive. This is, after all, a session about gender justice. But Liantsoa explained the logic from experience.

TI-Madagascar's pilot project worked with community resource management bodies called VOIs, formal grassroots organizations responsible for managing natural resources under Malagasy law, in the Diana region of Northern Madagascar. These groups are predominantly composed of men, and they hold real decision-making authority in their communities.

Rather than arriving and saying "you need to include women," the TI-Madagascar team started with a different question: what do these men already care about? These men cared deeply about environmental protection, about their communities' survival, about responsible stewardship of natural resources. The team's "Teboka Fito" (Seven Principles) guide on community rights in climate governance became the entry point of gender transformative change. One of the seven principles addressed gender inclusion in climate projects. But it was not introduced as a moral argument. It was introduced as a governance question.

"We did not lecture. We asked questions and listened. This worked because men start to recognize the problem themselves. Instead of feeling attacked, they begin to reflect and they were not being criticized. They were understanding their own system."

— **Nomena Liantsoa Rafanoarana**

Khurram, co-facilitator of the session, expanded on the insight from his own experience attending these webinars: "When you go and talk to a group of men who don't necessarily consider women's equal participation important, and you say 'we need to hear the perspectives of women,' then they're often not receptive. It doesn't connect. But if you start by saying, as a man, you are committed to caring for the environment, to caring for your community. Care work is important to all of us. In that context, you can start a conversation about who is actually doing this care work. It's mostly women. So you need to go and ask them. How can we build better together?"

Aruba picked up this thread of conversation and weaved in her own story from Bangladesh. YouthNet's EcoMen Project, now in its third year, started from the same insight. "In Bangladesh, women are the main burden-holders of the climate crisis. When disasters occur, they are the most affected. They carry the household responsibilities. And they are also more vulnerable because of the patriarchy, because of the toxic masculinity that exists."

"So we decided: why not think differently? Why not bring both sets of people into the room and start the conversation? That's how EcoMen began. We brought men and boys. We had discussions, leadership activities, father circles where we gathered fathers from vulnerable communities and asked: how can women and men share the burdens of climate change together?"

"Mivoria Lahy E": When a Tradition Names Itself

The most striking moment of witnessing change that Liantsoa described was a meeting where men, without prompting, named the thing they had been doing.

"The most powerful moment was not when we explained patriarchy to them. It was when they named 'Mivoria Lahy E' themselves."

— **TI-Madagascar slide, "What Worked — And Why"**

"Mivoria Lahy E" is a traditional call in Northern Madagascar. It translates roughly as "all men come, we are having a meeting." Women are not invited. It is simply how meetings have always been convened. Not a rule written anywhere. Just a practice so normalized it had become invisible.

During TI-Madagascar's second training session, after community leaders had gone back to their villages and tried to apply the Seven Principles, then returned to share what they had encountered,

the practice came up organically. Leaders began discussing it themselves, sharing their own experiences of what it actually looked like when women weren't in the room when decisions about shared resources were made. "They were not being criticized," Liantsoa said. "They were understanding their own system."

Several leaders made a concrete pledge that they would no longer hold community meetings without women present. It was a decision they arrived at themselves, in front of their peers.

"Mivoria Lahy E" is not a detail. It is the architecture of exclusion in Northern Madagascar.

— TI-Madagascar slide, "What the Ground Taught Us"

And once the women were invited and given space and power to speak and make decisions, after various TI-Madagascar's trainings, Liantsoa noted how "women were present and they were speaking." Not attending passively. Not sitting at the back. Speaking, sharing their experiences of climate change, weighing in on decisions.

"Presence without voice is not participation. What we witnessed, and what our evaluation confirmed, was not attendance. It was agency."

— TI-Madagascar slide, "They Were There — And They Spoke"

She described one community meeting that had been scheduled for two hours. It ran for five because the discussion had become so rich that the leaders themselves insisted on delaying the close. "They said: wait. We need to call all the women from the village before we can start. And we need the young people here too, because this is about their future."

But Liantsoa was honest about what had and hadn't shifted. "Individual men made genuine commitments. However, structures did not change at the same speed." Climate and environmental governance in Madagascar remains largely masculine by design, shaped by decades of policy and institutional choices that are not undone by a pledge made in a training room.

"A commitment made in a room is not yet a transformation lived in a community. It is where the work starts."

— TI-Madagascar slide, "What the Ground Taught Us"

What Keeps You Going? Activism Under Threat in Uganda

Kayinga's presentation moved the conversation onto harder terrain. His work opposing the East African Crude Oil Pipeline, which he described as a project that will displace farming communities, threaten Lake Victoria's ecosystem, and lock East Africa into decades of fossil fuel dependency, has made him a target of the Ugandan state.

"Environmental defenders in Uganda frequently face arrests and convictions for protesting against infrastructure projects they deem disastrous to the climate. My work is part of that broader struggle." He has also encountered organized disinformation campaigns designed to discredit activists and frame opposition to fossil fuels as opposition to development.

Participant Vidar Vetterfalk (MenEngage Europe) asked the question many in the room were holding: "It is so heartbreaking to hear you speak about the threats, the violence, the arrests. What keeps you going? How do you dare to continue?"

Kayinga Muddu Yisito

"The question of how I dare to continue is often answered by the very crisis we are fighting. We are speaking up for communities facing severe hunger and food insecurity — communities whose voices are not being listened to. We cannot stay silent when the climate crisis destroys livelihoods and lives."

— Kayinga Muddu Yisito

He named four things that sustain him.

1. The voices of the vulnerable communities he represents;
2. The youth, and his refusal to pass them a planet that cannot support them;
3. The growing movement of young people across Uganda and the world;
4. And solidarity that comes from organizing together, from sharing stories, from supporting one another after being released from detention.

"We are driven by the firm belief that another world is possible and that we must do everything in our power to secure it."

— Kayinga Muddu Yisito

Mark Langdon (White Ribbon Scotland) responded in the chat: "It is so sad that education, which should support emancipation, is used to reinforce systems of oppression." His comment pointed to the school curriculum as one of the primary transmission mechanisms for the very norms all three speakers were working to dismantle.

The Classroom as Contested Ground

Mark's question to all three speakers, about whether mainstream education systems were supporting or undermining transformational gender and climate justice work, drew some of the most personal and candid responses of the session.

Aruba spoke from her own school experience. "I started activism in Grade 7. I just finished high school. And what I realized over those years is that the curriculum itself pushes gender narratives."

In ninth grade, she was told she had to study Home Economics, a subject that covered cooking, cleaning, and interior decoration, and was barred from Political Science, because she was a girl. She appealed to the education board, and won her case but the structural inequality persisted.

"Boys were asked to take agriculture. We had to take sewing. They planted trees. We sewed clothes. Why couldn't we plant the trees and they sew the clothes?"

— Aruba Faruque · Deputy Executive Coordinator, YouthNet Global, Bangladesh

She also noted the political instability that makes sustained curriculum reform nearly impossible in Bangladesh: "With every government change, the curriculum changes. Political ideologies are reflected in what gets taught and right now, we are seeing radical politics rising, and that creates real uncertainty about whether gender justice-related ideas will survive the next election."

Similarly, Kayinga described what he called a "hidden curriculum" operating beneath Uganda's official gender equality policies where teacher attitudes, classroom dynamics, and textbook representation that consistently send girls the message that science and technical subjects are not for them, that their aspirations should be domestic rather than professional. Climate change makes this worse: "When drought destroys crops, families prioritize boys' education first. Girls are pulled out to work or to marry — to reduce expenses. Climate change is not gender neutral."

Liantsoa noted the same basic dynamic in Madagascar, but pointed to something she had found genuinely encouraging: youth associations and civil society organizations were moving faster than governments on these issues. "There are young people carrying these ideas into international spaces. Initiatives led by young people on positive masculinity, on sexual and reproductive health, and these are happening. Governments are partly compelled by international funders. But I think civil society is where the real force is coming from."

What the Conversation Converged On

Individual change is real — but structural change is the goal

All three spoke of meaningful shifts at the individual level: men in Madagascar who chose to open their meetings to women; fathers in Bangladesh engaging differently with questions of household climate burden; communities in Uganda beginning to question why girls carry water while boys go to school. But all three were equally clear that individual shifts are not structural reform. "Individual commitment cannot dismantle structural exclusion alone," Liantsoa's slides put it plainly. The norms have to change, and so do the institutions.

Local messengers carry further than outside facilitators

A consistent lesson across all three experiences: external organizations can open doors, provide frameworks, and create training space but they cannot be the primary messenger. "We were not the messenger, not because our message was wrong, but because we were not from the community," Liantsoa reflected. "We did not share their daily reality. But the VOI leaders did. When they spoke about community rights, climate governance, or women's participation, the message was stronger because it came from someone they trust."

Context is not background — it is the work

Liantsoa stated this most directly: "Before we design anything, we have to understand where we are not just geographically, but culturally, historically, socially. Context is not the background to the work. Context is the work. We must listen before we train. We must understand before we prescribe. Because if we skip that step if we arrive with our tools before understanding the terrain we will design interventions that look right on paper and miss in practice."

Men's engagement is underrecognized — and that needs to change

Sohanur Rahman (YouthNet Global, Bangladesh) made a pointed observation in the chat that resonated with all three speakers: "Men's engagement is not getting recognition. The myth is that gender is only about women's empowerment." What the session demonstrated is that engaging men, not as the problem to be fixed, but as potential allies who have real stakes in a more just world, is one of the most underdeveloped levers in climate justice work.

Bios

Aruba Faruque

Deputy Executive Coordinator, YouthNet Global, Bangladesh

Aruba Faruque is a 19-year-old Bangladeshi climate and environmental justice activist who began her advocacy at the age of 13.

She successfully petitioned for Bangladesh's Planetary Emergency Declaration, which led to climate and environment being integrated into the national curriculum.

Currently serving as the Deputy Executive Coordinator of YouthNet Global and has successfully completed her tenure of the Adolescent Ambassador for Climate and Health at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, she has emerged as a strong voice for youth leadership in climate action. At COP28, she highlighted the links between climate change, health, and child rights, advocating for a just transition and intergenerational equity. Her expertise lies in climate-health diplomacy, intergenerational equity, climate education and just transition.

Nomena Liantsoa Rafanoharana

Environmental Project Officer, Transparency International-Initiative Madagascar

Liantsoa Rafanoharana is Environment Project Officer at Transparency International – Initiative Madagascar (TI-MG), where she is committed to fighting corruption in the management of natural resources and promoting more transparent, inclusive, and accountable climate governance. She leads awareness-raising and civic engagement initiatives with civil society organizations and local communities to advance transparency, integrity, and environmental justice. With a background in political science, she combines her academic expertise with field experience to strengthen environmental governance in Madagascar.

Kayinga Muddu Yisito

Network Coordinator, Community Transformation Foundation Network (COTFONE)

Kayinga Muddu Yisito is a Ugandan human rights defender, social entrepreneur, and Network Coordinator of the Community Transformation Foundation Network (COTFONE). Kayinga's work sits at the intersection of environmental protection and social justice, specifically addressing how patriarchal structures and political backlash hinder climate justice in East Africa.