

ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Navigating Climate Governance: Intersectional Youth Visions of Just Urban Adaptation

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Received: 3 June 2025 | **Revised:** 26 October 2025 | **Accepted:** 5 December 2025

Keywords: climate adaptation | climate justice | gender non-binary | intersectionality | women | youth

ABSTRACT

This article investigates climate justice, specifically exploring youth perspectives, gender and intersectionality within urban climate adaptation governance in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Addressing significant gaps in existing research, it focuses explicitly on how young women and gender-diverse youth perceive climate adaptation, experience participation barriers and envision transformative pathways to achieve climate justice. Our qualitative, participatory research explores three central questions: (1) What barriers do young women and gender-diverse youth face in climate governance? (2) How do neoliberal discourses shape youth perceptions and experiences of adaptation responsibility? (3) What transformative approaches do these youth advocate for achieving inclusive climate justice? Our findings reveal significant procedural and recognitional injustices; participants described persistent marginalisation due to their age, gender identity and ethnicity, reflecting broader structural exclusions in climate governance processes. Despite initially internalising neoliberal adaptation narratives of individual resilience, participants critically challenged such discourses following experiences of inadequate systemic support during recent climate disasters. They advocated strongly for inclusive, community-based governance that addresses intersectional vulnerabilities and promotes genuine equity and procedural justice. Moreover, youth participants argued explicitly for systemic changes, including co-governance arrangements grounded in mātauranga Māori (Indigenous knowledge) and critiques of neoliberal capitalism and colonial frameworks. Ultimately, we argue that meaningful youth engagement requires transformative, intersectional approaches to climate adaptation that go beyond tokenism to redistribute decision-making power and address deeper social and environmental injustices.

1 | Introduction

Youth-led climate movements globally have transformed climate justice from a theoretical concept into a powerful rallying call (Foran et al. 2017; Rice et al. 2023; Simpson and Pizarro Choy 2023), increasingly influencing scientific assessments, policies and grassroots activism (Birdsall 2023; Bond et al. 2023; Jayawardena 2024; Piispa and Kiilakoski 2022). Despite

growing prominence, young people's perceptions of climate justice in adaptation are often overlooked (Hayward 2020; Mugabe and Moyo 2023). This gap is significant: youth not only face distinct climate vulnerabilities but also bring diverse, intersectional experiences shaped by their multiple identities (gender, age, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.), which influence how they engage with climate action and envision justice (Bowman 2019; Crenshaw 1990; Djoudi et al. 2016; Garcia et al. 2021).

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Addressing youth perspectives is essential to ensure adaptation efforts are equitable and inclusive of those who will inherit the consequences of today's decisions.

In this paper, we respond to calls from environmental justice scholars to go beyond abstract notions of equity and examine the embodied, lived experiences of socially marginalised groups in the climate crisis (Parsons et al. 2024; Walker et al. 2024). We focus on young women and gender-diverse youth in Aotearoa New Zealand, whose voices have been largely absent from the research about climate adaptation and climate policymaking (Gluckman et al. 2021). Most climate justice scholarship to date emphasises high-level principles (Brandstedt and Brölde 2019; Caney 2008; Cochrane 2014; Schlosberg 2013) or activist movements (Foran et al. 2017; Haugestad et al. 2021; Nairn et al. 2021; Pickard et al. 2020; Piispa and Kiilakoski 2022), with far fewer empirical studies examining how justice is operationalised on the ground in adaptation (Ambrey et al. 2017; Coggins et al. 2021; Diógenes-Lima et al. 2023; Lagi et al. 2023; Newell et al. 2021). There is a need for more nuanced, localised understandings of how climate justice is perceived and enacted by different people in their everyday contexts. Our study contributes to filling this gap by centring the experiences and ideas of youth at the local urban scale beyond the more visible areas of international protests or large surveys of climate attitudes.

Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, the largest city in Aotearoa, provides a compelling setting to explore these issues. The city is in the process of developing and implementing adaptation policies through Te Tāruke-ā-Tāwhiri: Auckland's Climate Plan and the nationwide National Adaptation Plan 2022 (Auckland Council 2020; Ministry for the Environment 2022). While these frameworks articulate ambitious goals for a climate-resilient and equitable city, critics contend that they remain largely aspirational and top-down, with limited mechanisms for systemic change or for empowering marginalised communities in decision-making (Jayawardena 2024; Parsons and Crease 2024a). The gap between ambition and implementation became starkly visible during two extreme weather events in early 2023: the Auckland Anniversary Day rainstorm on 27 January and Cyclone Gabrielle in February. The January floods set a new daily rainfall record of 249 mm (News Reporters 2024; Lo and Chan 2023; Welch 2023), inundating thousands of homes and prompting a delayed state of emergency, while Cyclone Gabrielle's high winds and torrential rain compounded damage across the region (RNZ News 2023; Williams 2024). Community-led relief efforts filled critical gaps as official responses faltered, demonstrating both the adaptive capacity of civil society and the weaknesses of government preparedness (Bradley 2024; Crimp 2024a, 2024b).

At the time of these events, Auckland's adaptation and emergency management systems were guided by Te Tāruke-ā-Tāwhiri Plan and the 2016–2021 Auckland Civil Defence and Emergency Management (CDEM) Group Plan (Bush 2023). Both documents emphasised resilience and identified flooding and 'superstorms' as high-priority hazards, yet operational readiness lagged behind their policy aspirations. Although the Council had begun integrating climate resilience into water and infrastructure planning and promoting blue-green stormwater design, the city's ageing drainage network was ill-equipped to manage

the unprecedented rainfall. The independent Auckland Flood Response Review (Bush 2023) found that Auckland Emergency Management was under-resourced and under-prepared, with untested protocols, delayed communication and unclear coordination among agencies. These shortcomings revealed a persistent gap between climate adaptation goals and institutional capacity, highlighting the urgent need for more just, inclusive and actionable approaches to adaptation governance in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Against this background of policy ambitions and lived realities, our exploratory study investigates how young women and gender non-binary individuals in Auckland imagine and navigate climate justice in the context of urban adaptation planning. Grounded in an intersectional, feminist lens, we ask: *How do young women and gender-diverse people perceive climate justice in Auckland's adaptation efforts, and what changes do they envision for more just and inclusive adaptation?* Through photovoice, focus groups and interviews, we engaged 10 young people (ages 18–24) to document their experiences and reflections amidst Auckland's recent climate shocks. These youth were not all seasoned activists; some had participated in climate strikes or community projects, while others operated more at the margins of formal climate policymaking. By concentrating on their stories, we aim to amplify voices often tokenised or unheard in adaptation discourse.

Our findings reveal participants articulate climate justice intersectionally, linking local adaptation to broader power structures. In the wake of the January floods and Cyclone Gabrielle, participants critiqued how hegemonic norms in politics and planning marginalise youth and diverse genders. They highlighted procedural injustice (exclusion from decision-making) and drew attention to recognitional justice deficits (the lack of respect for and representation of their identities and knowledge). At the same time, they put forward transformative ideas, from reimagining participation beyond tokenism to challenging neoliberal growth imperatives and embedding Indigenous Māori values in planning. They echo wider movements prioritising equity, care and collaboration over business-as-usual approaches.

In this paper, we consistently use the term 'women' (rather than 'female') to describe our participants and others; we align with gender identity terminology that acknowledges womanhood as a social identity, not just a biological category. This is important for recognitional justice—honouring participants' self-identity and avoiding language that could imply a reductive or objectifying view of gender (e.g., 'female' as an adjective can be seen as clinical or emphasising sex over identity). The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, we outline the theoretical framework of our research, which integrates literature on just adaptation, feminist urbanism, intersectionality and settler-colonial critiques. We clarify key concepts—such as climate justice—and distinguish how each informs our analysis. Next, we detail our methodology, including the participatory methods, recruitment strategy and analytic approach. We note the complementary strengths of photovoice, focus groups and interviews in capturing different facets of youth experience. We then present our findings organised into three thematic areas corresponding to the significant insights summarised above: (1) barriers to youth participation in climate governance, (2) the influence and

critique of neoliberal adaptation discourses and (3) youth agency in advancing climate adaptation justice. We interweave participant voices with scholarly perspectives to provide depth and context. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for climate justice and urban adaptation research and practice. We emphasise the urgent need for procedural and recognitional justice in adaptation planning—ensuring not only fair outcomes (distributive justice) but also fair representation and participation of marginalised groups while acknowledging the limitations of our small sample. We call for greater inclusion of young women and gender-diverse youth in decision-making. We suggest pathways for planners and policymakers to co-create more just and resilient urban futures in partnership with those youth.

2 | Theoretical Framework: Intersectional Climate Justice in Urban Adaptation

Because questions of justice and adaptation intersect across environmental, social and cultural domains, this study adopts an explicitly interdisciplinary approach. We draw from climate adaptation scholarship, feminist and gender studies, Indigenous studies and youth citizenship research to situate our work within a broad but interconnected body of knowledge. This integration reflects the complex realities of adaptation as both a technical and a deeply social process. Framing the research in this way highlights that equitable adaptation requires insights from multiple disciplines to capture the full spectrum of environmental, political and social transformations that define climate justice.

2.1 | Just Adaptation and Climate Justice in a Settler-Colonial Context

Just adaptation embeds climate justice principles within climate adaptation planning and on-the-ground projects, recognising that adaptation is not a neutral, technocratic exercise but a profoundly political process shaped by power relations and epistemic authority (Eriksen et al. 2015; Malloy and Ashcraft 2020; Siders 2022). In practice, top-down planning has often privileged elites and sidelined marginalised communities (Combetti et al. 2019; Hardy et al. 2017; Johnson et al. 2022). In response, scholars and practitioners advance just adaptation to align actions with climate justice through inclusive processes and equitable outcomes (Holland 2017; Shi et al. 2016; Shi and Moser 2021). Evidence from Aotearoa shows how centring care and relationships can move practice beyond rhetoric towards more collaborative, equitable governance (Bond and Barth 2020). Building on Paavola and Adger's (2006) foundational work, later contributions stress that justice changes both how decisions are made and what they deliver: rebalancing power, sharing resources and broadening who decides (Holland 2017; Schlosberg 2012; Schlosberg et al. 2017; Shi et al. 2016). Here, we use 'just adaptation' to refer to adaptation guided by climate justice principles across the full cycle of planning and implementation.

Climate justice provides the ethical foundation for just adaptation. We focus on distributive, procedural and recognitional justice (Schlosberg and Collins 2014), while acknowledging related strands of intergenerational, multispecies, reparative

and epistemic justice (Almassi 2022; Byskov and Hyams 2022; Tschakert et al. 2021; Winter 2021). In adaptation, core questions include: who is most exposed or protected as well as well-resourced or under-resourced (distribution), who participates and with what influence (procedure) and whose identities and knowledge systems are valued (recognition) (Chu et al. 2025; Chu and Michael 2019; Holland 2017). A policy may reduce flood risk (a distributive gain) yet still violate justice if communities are relocated without meaningful participation, erasing place-based ties and knowledge (Hardy et al. 2017; Parsons and Crease 2024b). While climate justice debates initially centred on mitigation and burden sharing, attention has expanded to local adaptation, where city-scale governance often determines whose futures are planned for and whose are planned over (Mugabe and Moyo 2023; Parsons et al. 2024). Our study foregrounds procedural and recognitional justice in urban adaptation—given the limited decision-making power and historical marginalisation of youth and gender-diverse people within planning regimes—while situating their experiences within broader distributive concerns, including intergenerational equity in who pays for adaptation efforts and efforts to enhance resilience (Huq 2020; Irazábal and Huerta 2016).

2.2 | Gender and Adaptation: Beyond Binaries and Tokenism

Gender shapes exposure, capacity and voice in adaptation. Research documents how women—especially those in marginalised communities—face heightened risks due to structural inequities in resources, care burdens and access to decision-making (Djoudi et al. 2016; Garcia and Cifor 2019; Rao et al. 2019, 2021). Feminist scholars caution against casting women as either inherently vulnerable or eco-saviours, urging attention to how gender roles intersect with class, race and other hierarchies to produce differentiated impacts and capacities (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Resurrección 2013; Wilson and Chu 2020). Moving beyond binaries matters: trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people encounter erasure in programmes designed around male/female categories, along with cisnormative and hostile institutional cultures (Alibudbud 2023; Boğaç 2024; Chetkovich 2019; Elias and Saffran 2020; James et al. 2023; Rushton et al. 2019). Even when 'inclusion' is claimed, tokenism persists. In male-dominated spaces, small minorities are often marginalised, visible yet sidelined, with their contributions scrutinised but rarely decisive (Ahmed 2018; Kanter 2008; Levac and Worts 2018; Perrott 2016). As studies of climate institutions show, *prima facie* participation meets quotas without shifting power, leaving norms intact (Magnúsdóttir and Kronsell 2024; Spajić et al. 2019). Without cultural change and critical mass, participation can reproduce the very inequities it purports to fix.

2.3 | Intersectionality and Power in Climate Governance

An intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1990, 2017) strengthens climate justice and just adaptation frameworks by tracing how overlapping axes of power—gender, race, class, age, ability, indigeneity—shape vulnerability (Djoudi et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2022), and their experiences of climate change impacts as

well as climate responses (Gutierrez and Hopkins 2015). Treating 'youth' or 'women' as homogeneous obscures internal differences and can misdirect policy (de Leeuw and Greenwood 2016; Garcia et al. 2021; Gergan and Curley 2023). Scholars call for an intersectional pivot to address root drivers (patriarchy, racism, colonialism), redress differential vulnerabilities, value care and place-based solutions and build cross-identity solidarities (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Crease et al. 2019; de Jong 2024). Practically, our analysis attends to each participant's positionality—for instance, a young Māori woman may confront a different configuration of barriers than a young Pākehā woman or a young Māori man—and to how disadvantages can compound (ageism + sexism + racism) or be mitigated by privilege (Johnson et al. 2023). By embracing intersectionality in our framework, we aim to highlight opportunities for more inclusive adaptation practices that actively empower those youth who sit at the crossroads of multiple inequalities. In short, an intersectional approach enables us to envision just adaptation not as a one-size-fits-all solution, but as a nuanced, context-specific project attentive to the matrix of domination (patriarchy, racism, colonialism, classism, ableism, etc.) that shapes climate resilience and policy processes (Casey et al. 2025; Magnúsdóttir and Kronsell 2021).

2.4 | Just Adaptation in Aotearoa New Zealand

Finally, we situate our understanding of just adaptation and climate justice within Aotearoa New Zealand's settler-colonial context, where questions of justice are inseparable from the history and ongoing realities of colonisation (Parsons and Crease 2024a). In this context, as Jayawardena (2024) observes, climate justice is inextricably linked with decolonisation and Indigenous rights. Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi)—the founding agreement between Māori and the British Crown—establishes a partnership that contemporary climate governance must honour as part of a just approach (Johnson et al. 2022; Mantyka-Pringle et al. 2015; Parsons and Nalau 2016). Yet, as recent analyses observe, Aotearoa's climate adaptation policies have only begun to engage with Māori and other ethnic minority perspectives, and often this engagement remains superficial or tokenistic (Jayawardena 2024; Parsons and Crease 2024a). Just adaptation in a settler-colonial society requires confronting colonial injustices: this means actively incorporating Māori (and other Indigenous) knowledge, values and leadership into adaptation planning, and ensuring that Indigenous communities are not treated as mere stakeholders but as partners with decision-making power (O'Sullivan 2024; Smith 2020). In terms of recognitional justice, it entails acknowledging Māori as *tangata whenua* (people of the land) and respecting their ancestral relationship with the environment as fundamental to designing equitable adaptation measures. Failing to include Indigenous rights and epistemologies in climate adaptation not only perpetuates settler-colonial power imbalances but can also lead to maladaptation (adaptation actions that inadvertently deepen injustice or vulnerability) (Johnson et al. 2023). For example, relocation or infrastructure decisions that ignore Māori land connections or marginalise Māori input can undermine community resilience and trust (Bordner et al. 2020; Dhillon 2021; Jones et al. 2014; Tabassum 2021). Indigenous climate justice frameworks stress Indigenous peoples' self-determination, the restitution of land

and resource governance and the revitalisation of Indigenous environmental stewardship/guardianship as essential pillars of a just climate future (Moulton 2024; Reed et al. 2020).

In Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, therefore, achieving a climate just urban future means addressing not only the gender- and age-based marginalisation of our youth participants, but also the broader legacy of colonial land dispossession and institutional racism that shape the city's governance structures (Bartholomew 2020; Bécares et al. 2013; Belich 2013; Parsons and Crease 2024a, 2024b). We acknowledge that our study's participant sample did not include any Māori or Pacific youth; a limitation that leaves essential perspectives on the intersection of Indigeneity and adaptation under-represented. Although we emphasise how colonialist discourses and power dynamics form an important backdrop to the experiences discussed in our findings, the absence of Indigenous voices in our project points to the need for further research centring Māori and Pacific youth perspectives. Incorporating those voices is vital for a fully intersectional understanding of climate justice in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (McNamara and Farbotko 2017; Si'isi'ialafia-Mau and Percival 2024). Ultimately, our theoretical framework recognises that confronting colonial inequalities is a prerequisite for just adaptation in Aotearoa. This integrated lens—bringing together climate justice (distributive-procedural-recognitional dimensions), intersectionality and decolonial analysis—guides our exploration of how young women and gender-diverse youth envision more just and inclusive urban climate adaptation.

There is often a gap between rhetoric and reality in participation. In many climate planning processes, participation remains tokenistic. Various scholars (Dwivedi and Paoletta 2024; Spajić et al. 2019) have critiqued attempts to set quotas for the number of women to be included in workshops as a box-ticking exercise that does not involve ceding any real power to the participants. Kanter's (2008) concept of tokens, discussed earlier, is instructive: in adaptation committees or youth panels where young women, or indigenous participants are a tiny minority, their presence may serve as a fig leaf for inclusivity while the substantive decisions continue to be made by the usual power-holders. Ahmed (2018) critiques how institutions 'rock the boat' by bringing in women or people of colour as diversity workers, yet the institutions remain unchanged, often exhausting and marginalising them. In climate planning, similar critiques have been raised: Lau et al. (2021) documents how some international climate funds require community involvement, but in practice, communities have little influence, leading to frustration and cynicism. Bubb and Le Dé (2022) similarly note that in Pacific Island adaptation projects, local participants are sometimes used to legitimise projects to funders rather than to genuinely shape project design.

Participation's transformative potential occurs only when marginalised groups gain decision-making authority or co-equal governance status. This can be seen in examples of insurgent planning or grassroots-led adaptation (Blackett et al. 2021; Huq 2020). For instance, research on urban informal settlements shows that when residents lead adaptation (e.g., organising waste clearance to prevent flooding or negotiating with authorities for infrastructure), the solutions tend to be more appropriate and just (Anguelovski et al. 2016; Fisher and Dodman 2019;

Shi et al. 2016). These practices often challenge ‘business-as-usual’ by asserting the rights of the poor or minority groups to the city’s resources and planning processes.

Adaptation is also frequently articulated through a neoliberal imaginary that responsibilises individuals, depoliticises structural drivers and recasts resilience as a personal obligation rather than a collective project (Brown 2014; Chandler and Reid 2016; Shi et al. 2016). This paradigm, which is increasingly being articulated in Aotearoa in government reports (Finance and Expenditure Committee 2024a, 2024b; Independent Reference Group 2025), privileges market logics and behaviour change over redistributive or power-sharing reforms, shifting burdens onto communities while absolving institutions of deeper obligations. Such framings crowd out procedural justice—limiting who decides and what knowledge counts—whereas a just adaptation approach recentres equity and collective agency by embedding inclusive, power-sharing processes across the adaptation planning cycle (Shi and Moser 2021).

Finally, inclusive planning is closely tied to the notion of recognition—specifically recognising young people as legitimate political actors in climate governance (Hayward 2020; Thew et al. 2020). Historically, youth have been viewed as citizens-in-training, to be seen but not heard in policy arenas. This is changing with the rise of youth climate activism and the formal inclusion of youth delegations in international processes; however, at local levels, youth still often struggle to secure a seat at the table. The concept of youth climate citizenship (Firinci Orman 2022; Parsons et al. 2023) argues that young people are already enacting citizenship through protest and community engagement, and planning institutions should adapt to this reality by creating avenues for youth leadership. Our theoretical grounding takes this stance: that youth (including those under 18, though our study’s participants are 18–24) are present citizens of the climate-affected world, not just future inheritors and thus justice demands their meaningful participation now.

Thus, the theoretical framework guiding this study is a climate justice lens enriched by intersectional feminist insights. Through this lens, we approach our research question, expecting to see evidence of these dynamics in how our participants experience and envision climate adaptation in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland. We now turn to our methodology, which was designed to be congruent with these theoretical commitments, allowing participants to share their stories and insights in an open and empowering way.

3 | Methodology

We employed a qualitative multi-method approach grounded in intersectionality and feminist participatory principles to examine young women’s and gender-diverse youths’ perceptions of climate justice in urban adaptation. This approach emphasises marginalised voices and values their embodied knowledge as essential (McKendrick 2020). Ethical approval (UAHPEC25148) ensured informed consent, confidentiality and cultural sensitivity. Our use of photovoice, focus groups and semi-structured interviews allowed methodological complementarity and data triangulation. These methods provided varied entry points into

participants’ lived experiences, enriching understanding and validating recurring themes (Creswell and Creswell 2017).

3.1 | Participant Recruitment and Sample Characteristics

We recruited young women (trans and cis) and gender-diverse youth aged 18–24 in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, through purposive and snowball sampling. Recruitment involved local youth networks, social media (Facebook, Instagram), university student associations and outreach to climate-oriented community organisations. Gender-diverse participants were explicitly invited, emphasising youth perspectives on climate justice. Recruitment was challenging during climate emergencies and pandemic disruptions, resulting in a total of 10 participants, eight of whom identified as women and two as non-binary (Table 1).

Although small, the sample was diverse in ethnicity, including Asian (e.g., Chinese, Malaysian Chinese, Sri Lankan/Pākehā and Indian/Croatian) and Pākehā (New Zealand European) backgrounds. Participants ranged from 18 to 24 years old, with a median age of 21. Most were university students, engaged in climate activities such as School Strikes 4 Climate or environmental NGOs, grounding our study in everyday youth perspectives. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and gender identity terminology reflected how participants identified (e.g., ‘Jordan (young woman)’ and ‘Ashley (non-binary)’).

3.2 | Data Collection: Photovoice, Focus Groups and Interviews

Data collection began with a focus group involving four participants, facilitated by the lead researcher, structured into two discussion phases: general climate change discussions and conversations about identity and climate justice. Photovoice was then introduced, involving participants taking photos responding to three prompts: (1) social norms in daily life; (2) experiences of climate change and (3) actions signifying successful or

TABLE 1 | Participant pseudonyms and gender identity.

Pseudonym	Gender
Chris	Woman
Kelly	Woman
Drew	Woman
Jordan	Woman
Alex	Woman
Sam	Woman
Riley	Woman
Max	Woman
Tracey	Non-binary
Ashley	Non-binary

unsuccessful adaptation (Schumann et al. 2019). Photovoice enables creative, visual expression and active participant engagement (Cai and Marks 2021). Participants had 2 weeks to take these photographs, which were later shared and discussed in a second 90-min focus group held in the university's Queer space, ensuring comfort and openness (Bagnoli and Clark 2010; Conradson 2013).

To include those unable to participate in focus groups, six additional semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom. Interviews lasted approximately 60 min, with the option for flexible extensions. Questions explored participants' experiences with recent extreme weather, perceptions of authorities' responses, inclusion in planning processes, interpretations of 'climate justice', and visions of a climate just Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Participants shared personal narratives and reflections, capturing nuanced perspectives.

Combining photovoice, focus groups and interviews provided breadth and depth, accommodating diverse participant expressions. Triangulation helped validate key themes identified across methods (Creswell and Creswell 2017). Focus groups offered collective dialogue and collaborative interpretation; photovoice visually expressed complex emotions and experiences and interviews gave detailed individual perspectives, accommodating disruptions from climate events. Recordings of focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim, with photovoice images accompanied by participant-generated captions.

3.3 | Reflexivity

In keeping with calls for reflexivity and transparency in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke 2021; Kwame 2017), the researchers acknowledge how their social positions influenced the research process and interpretation. The research team comprises three women of diverse ages, ethnicities and abilities: a young Pākehā (New Zealand European) woman in her mid-twenties at the time of the research (the lead researcher), a middle-aged woman of mixed Māori and Pākehā heritage in her fifties, and a middle-aged disabled woman of Māori, Pākehā and Lebanese descent in her forties. These intersecting identities—spanning generation, gender, indigeneity and (dis)ability—shaped the perspectives brought to the study and guided the analysis of climate adaptation narratives. For instance, the lead researcher's proximity in age to the youth participants fostered a peer-like rapport and an insider perspective. In contrast, the two older researchers—both of whom have Māori heritage and longer life experience—provided a decolonial, intergenerational lens for critically examining adaptation policies. Additionally, the perspective of the disabled researcher on the team heightened the research team's awareness of accessibility and the often-overlooked dimension of disability in climate justice discourse (notably, none of the youth participants identified as disabled).

The researchers do not claim to be objective, detached observers; rather, guided by feminist and decolonial research principles (Glückler and Panitz 2021; Jones et al. 2023; Valentine 2007),

they approach the study through a relational and justice-oriented lens that emphasises co-construction of knowledge and prioritises equity. By openly reflecting on their positionalities, the researchers aim to enhance transparency and strengthen methodological rigour, illuminating how their backgrounds inform the study's relational approach and interpretation of findings. In line with feminist methodological principles (McDowell 1992; Valentine 2007), absolute objectivity is neither claimed nor pursued; instead, we aim for representations resonating authentically with participants' experiences, aligned with existing scholarly literature. Participants' direct quotations and photographs prominently illustrate themes, contextualised within our theoretical framework, clearly connecting empirical data to scholarly discourse.

3.4 | Data Analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013, 2022) due to its interpretive flexibility and compatibility with theoretical frameworks like intersectionality. The analysis involved six phases: (1) familiarisation with transcripts and photovoice materials; (2) line-by-line inductive coding; (3) clustering similar codes into initial themes; (4) reviewing themes for coherence and relevance; (5) refining, naming and defining final themes and (6) constructing the narrative of findings. While theoretically informed, the analysis remained open to emerging insights from participant narratives. We maintained reflexivity (see Section 3.4), mindful of our positionalities (one author identifying as a Pākehā woman in her mid-20s, two as middle-aged Indigenous Māori women), influencing interpretation and thematic construction. Throughout the coding and interpretation process, the lead author maintained a reflexive analysis process, noting assumptions, emotional reactions and emerging insights. Regular discussions, initially among the first two authors, then later, the third author, allowed us to interrogate how our respective positionalities—as a young Pākehā woman and two middle-aged Māori/Pākehā women (one disabled)—shaped our reading of the data. This iterative dialogue helped ensure that themes were co-constructed with sensitivity to power, identity and voice, consistent with feminist and decolonial qualitative practice.

3.5 | Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While our study provides rich insights, it also has limitations that suggest avenues for future research. The sample size and localised scope mean our findings should be generalised with caution. Young people in other regions or of different age ranges might have divergent views; for example, rural youth or younger teenagers might emphasise different issues. We also note that our participants, despite diverse identities, most (but not all) had some engagement with climate or community environmental issues. Future research could seek out disengaged or hard-to-reach youth to understand barriers to participation that might not appear in a sample of already-interested individuals. Additionally, our focus on gender and youth was intersectional but not exhaustive; for instance, none of our participants identified as having a disability, an

important facet of intersectionality present in the literature (Grech and Soldatic 2015; Kosanic et al. 2022). Research with disabled youth or LGBTQ+ youth (beyond the two non-binary voices we had) in climate adaptation would further enrich the understanding of recognitional justice in this arena (Alibudbud 2023; Kosanic et al. 2022).

4 | Findings

Our findings explore the three key themes of (a) barriers to meaningful participation in decision-making; (b) the dominance of neoliberal adaptation discourses framing climate action as an individual responsibility; and (c) active agency and advocacy for inclusive, equity-driven, and transformative adaptation away from 'quick fixes'. Each theme explores our participants' experiences and perspectives on climate governance and adaptation in Auckland.

4.1 | Barriers to Meaningful Participation in Climate Governance: Age, Gender and Cultural Identity

Participants felt marginalised in political and planning spaces due to youth and gender, often treated as outsiders despite their knowledge and passion for climate and other environmental issues. This theme includes interrelated barriers of adultism, sexism and trans/non-binary exclusion in climate governance. The result, as described by the youth, is a pervasive sense of tokenism and dismissal that undermines procedural and recognitional justice.

Participants who had attempted to engage with local government or community decision-making recounted strikingly similar frustrations. 'They do not take you seriously', said Jordan (regarding her interactions with officials on adaptation and resilience programmes). Jordan felt that being a young person was the 'biggest factor' hindering her influence. She explained: 'when you're a young person wanting to engage in higher political change, being young is barrier [...] feeling like you don't have enough experience and your ideas don't matter'. This sentiment was echoed by others. Ashley (non-binary) remarked that at public climate meetings, people try to 'diminish me, and [...] [make] me be quiet and [stop] talking'. Ashley could be seen as attributing this to a double bias: being young and non-binary.

Tracey (non-binary) offered a powerful metaphor through a photovoice image: a photo of a metal cage (the open back of a van resembling a cage) (see Figure 1). In the focus group, Tracey explained that this image 'represents being ... gender-diverse in the current climate change context. Because if I'm in this cage, I can't get out unless someone (a man) on the other side were to open it and allow space to be taken outside of the cage'. The cage symbolises how access to decision-making spaces is controlled by those in power (envisioned as an older man who holds the key). For Tracey, as a non-binary person, the political arena feels like a confined space that they cannot fully enter on their own terms—their freedom to participate is contingent on being 'let out' or permitted by the gatekeepers.



FIGURE 1 | Photo of a van with a cage in it.

Chris felt 'uncomfortable' in climate policy spaces dominated by 'old white men' who assume she 'doesn't know what [she's] talking about', leaving her feeling a 'lack of confidence'. She reports that she ends up feeling a 'lack of confidence in those spaces'. During her interview, Alex similarly reported feeling that various factors restricted her abilities to participate in government spaces:

Sometimes I feel like age. And just like, yeah, a lot of decisions made by like, old dudes. And yeah, sometimes it does feel like at an individual level, it's hard to make a meaningful change [...] but, sometimes I feel like my [Chinese] ethnicity, I find that, I remember when I interned somewhere, and a lot of the people, the demographic there was very old, very like, Caucasian and I didn't really see any other Asian people.

Here, Alex demonstrates how her different subjectivities intersect, with youth who are not white facing additional feelings of marginalisation in professional spaces.

Participants described political meetings as male-dominated spaces where they felt scrutinised or too intimidated to attend despite climate concerns. Drew imagined herself entering a 'roomful of old men politicians' and being too unconfident that she could not speak. Drew posed her question to her peers during the focus group: 'Do you ever [feel] like ... it's gonna be either a roomful of like, old men politician kind of people...?' She worries that she will say 'something wrong' and 'the whole

room is just going to turn on me and be like you're so dumb'. Chris concurred: 'those spaces can ... feel discriminatory. ... Unless you're [an] educated ... middle-aged white man, you feel like people probably aren't going to take you seriously'. Jordan also conveyed how 'feeling confident enough to be able to express your thoughts and feelings and have a voice in these spaces, even with local board spaces, but on wider spectrums [is] really challenging', highlighting 'a lack of support going towards supporting young people and their voice around any issue, let alone climate change, is really poor'. This damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't scenario exemplifies how young women and gender-diverse participants navigate tone policing and tightropes of behaviour in male-centric settings. It is a psychological burden that can discourage continued participation.

These comments illustrate the age and gender norms at play. The participants are acutely aware of being minorities (or 'tokens') in such settings; visible as youth or as women/non-binary, but their contributions are often rendered invisible. Tracey summarised this dual experience in another way: 'Firstly, it's a man-dominated space... so you are [...] an 'other', not the norm.[...] it can be uncomfortable to even be there, regardless of if you're gonna voice your opinion or not. And there's also [the] assumption that if you're not a man, you might not be competent'. This statement hits both gender and age: youth and women/non-binary people are treated as anomalies ('not the norm') and presumed less capable.

The presumption of incompetence or inexperience due to age emerged as a grievance. Some participants felt that if they were to participate in official forums/political spaces, their ideas would be met with condescension. Chris expressed frustration that by the time her views are valued, it will be 'further down the track', indicating age-based dismissiveness. In response to Chris, Kelly felt that there were other measures at play around expectations on youth to take responsibility, suggesting that 'the older generations' expect youth to 'do something' and they believe: 'why do we have to worry about it, it's for the younger people'. She followed by stating 'the balance of that they want us to do it, but they don't want us to do it because we're not smart, we're not experienced enough, and it's like, [well], which way do you want it?' Jordan expressed that 'young people start at the bottom of the pyramid' and she is 'asked on quite a lot of occasions because [she is] in the sphere' but that she is 'not a good representation of youth voices as a single person' and that 'we need more voices in this space'. A different participant, however, felt oppositely, suggesting that '21 is a pretty adult age to have a voice and [be] listened to'. Such ageist attitudes discount the very real knowledge and innovative ideas that youth have about their own futures. As Thew et al. (2020) argue regarding youth in climate governance, the 'perceived inexperience' trope is often used to sideline youth, even as those same youth are educated on climate science and actively engaged in their communities. Our participants' experiences reflect this dynamic.

Non-binary participants, on the other hand, reported a different challenge: misrecognition. Both Tracey and Ashley mentioned instances of being misgendered or having their pronouns ignored during climate events. Ashley reported:

I [am] constantly get misgendered in these spaces [...] I constantly say my pronouns are they/them, and it's not a suggestion. [It's] not a preference, these are my pronouns, please respect me. [...] I feel that like, cause I'm queer, nonbinary, I also get ... misogyny isn't necessarily the right word, but it feels quite misogynistic at times. [...] I feel quite oppressed in the same way that a lot of women do as well in spaces [so] they try to diminish me, and they try to [make] me be quiet and [stop] talking.

Likewise Tracey noted:

I think in terms of gender identity, especially older people tend to get really frustrated with the fact that something such as non-binary exists, even though it has for a very long time, because they're kind of like, oh, you young people and your gender issues ... so I feel like when it comes to maybe representation of gender-diverse peoples, then yeah, there's a lot of pushback, because they don't get it, and also can't be bothered incorporating it. It's just like too much work, or out of their scope, or they don't have that experience, so they don't realise the importance of it.

Both Ashley and Tracey felt that it was hard to feel valued when people in positions of authority will not even acknowledge something as basic as their identity. This is a clear breach of recognitional justice—if someone's core identity is not respected, how can their views be genuinely respected?

Participants strategically formed peer support networks through climate strikes (School Strike 4 Climate), election debates, community groups, pride marches, university networks and unions. Despite these challenges, participants did find allies among older generations. Tracey (non-binary) acknowledged that some older people 'just surprise you' by actively supporting climate action. They described how an older person might say 'yeah, I believe in climate action', and 'you're like fantastic, you're here, you're doing something, amazing'. In other words, not every older adult dismissed them—a few became encouraging partners in climate efforts, providing intergenerational solidarity and hope. Thus, while ageism and gender norms remain systemic, youth navigate these barriers partly through intergenerational alliances.

Young women and gender-diverse youth in our study identified significant procedural and recognitional injustices in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland's climate adaptation decision-making. Age and gender intersect to position them as 'outsiders within' (to borrow Patricia Hill Collins' term) the process—present but peripheral (Collins 1986). They face a lack of respect that manifests as both subtle biases and overt exclusion. This directly connects to our theoretical discussion: it evidences gender norms in action, it shows the need for intersectional awareness (youth who are also from ethnic minorities, for instance, felt a compounding effect), and it validates critiques that current participatory

mechanisms in climate planning are often tokenistic rather than truly inclusive. These barriers set the stage for the next theme, as they also inform how youth perceive the broader climate action narratives and policies (many of which they see as shaped by the same forces that marginalise them).

4.2 | The Limits of Neoliberal Adaptation Discourses

The second major theme that emerged is a critical examination of the dominant discourses around climate adaptation, particularly the narrative that emphasises personal responsibility, individual behaviour change and ‘resilience’ in a depoliticised sense. Participants held differing views on adaptation actions, but through discussion and reflection (especially during focus groups), they collectively identified how neoliberal ideology—which values individualism, self-reliance and market solutions—permeates the way adaptation is approached in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. They experienced and observed the limits of this discourse during the extreme weather events, and several explicitly called for more radical systemic changes (even if some initially echoed neoliberal ideas).

Initially, some participants internalised neoliberal resilience rhetoric. For example, Max (young woman) spoke about coping with extreme weather events through focusing on ‘personal mindset; if you keep the positivity, it’s easy to adapt’. Max’s emphasis on positivity and individual adaptation reflects what many have dubbed the ‘resilience gospel’ (Brown 2014): the idea that we should all become resilient individuals, capable of bouncing back, rather than demanding large-scale societal changes.

Kelly (young woman) offered a similar example but with a slight twist. In their workplace, there was a drought-awareness campaign due to a water shortage a couple of years back (Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland experienced a severe drought in 2020). Kelly took a photo of a poster in an elevator that encouraged people to conserve water, with statistics on water usage (their photovoice Figure 2). Kelly recounted: ‘I thought that was great, because every time any of us go in the elevator ... it alert[ed] people that this is an issue’. They saw this awareness poster as a successful adaptation intervention at the individual level—it got colleagues to change behaviour (shorter taps running, etc.).

On the surface, these perspectives from Max and Kelly seem to endorse the mainstream approach: focus on what you can do (keep positive, use less water), and assume that widespread small actions will collectively address the problem. This resonates with how many governments frame climate action: through personal responsibility (e.g., save energy, be prepared and ‘build back better’ yourself). This reflects neoliberal adaptation discourses critiqued for shifting responsibility to individuals (Adam and Groves 2007; Chandler and Reid 2016). Indeed, as Max and Tracey expressed, they felt empowered by the idea that their attitude and actions could make a difference—a hallmark of neoliberal discourse is that it sells itself as empowering (‘you can solve this by changing yourself’).

However, as discussions deepened (and especially as participants reflected on the extreme events), cracks in this narrative

became evident to them. After the floods, the limitations of ‘positive mindset’ adaptation hit home, especially for those who directly faced hardships. Sam was one such participant. Her home was severely flooded in January, forcing her to evacuate. Sam’s testimony starkly contrasted the individualist narrative: ‘It was very stressful. We had to find a temporary place to live, and Civil Defence [the emergency management agency] weren’t very helpful either... no one wanted to help with accommodation, so we just had to find somewhere ourselves’. In recounting this, Sam exposed how the system essentially left her on her own—the epitome of neoliberal response, where the state’s role is minimal and individuals must fend for themselves. Her voice carried frustration at the absence of support (‘no one wanted to help’), highlighting a failure of distributive and procedural justice in disaster response. Sam’s experience made tangible the ‘resilience gap’: the difference between telling citizens to be resilient and the actual capacity of people (especially those not wealthy) to absorb shocks without external assistance. The contrast between Max’s initial optimism and Sam’s difficult experience highlights flaws in the ‘just stay positive’ narrative.

Participants critically described government officials’ engagement with adaptation as just ‘buzzwords’ (Jordan) and ‘Band-Aid solutions’ (Alex). This cynicism connects to the neoliberal discourse: they perceived that authorities prefer low-cost, surface-level interventions (like awareness campaigns or solely infrastructure-focused lens [Tracey]) that put responsibility on the public, instead of tackling more costly or politically difficult measures (like planning around Ngāhere [forest] [Jordan]), imposing regulations on larger companies (Sam, Max) or actual government investment in emission reduction (Chris) or renewables and shutting down mining and deep-sea oil drilling (Ashely). Many participants reflected that governments or corporations should be responsible for solutions, but adopted individualised-focused narratives of adaptation when later discussing solutions. This inability to distinguish between responsibility could show the devolution of climate responsibility to the local level or individualist neoliberal ideologies in Aotearoa (following Hayward 2020; Lahikainen 2018; Nalau et al. 2015; Piispa and Kiilakoski 2022).

Another element participants flagged was how neoliberal discourse depoliticises climate adaptation by framing impacts as inevitable and requiring individual adjustment rather than collective action or political change. Jordan counters individualisation, arguing ‘it’s building capacity and resilience for communities, individuals, businesses, and local governments’ that is key for adaptation. Jordan’s point hints at the missing talk of root causes in the prevailing discourse; a gap many of our participants want to fill with calls for accountability—particularly among local authorities and decision-makers—and for preventive action that reduces future harm and inequitable climate impacts.

This theme shows participants’ shift from initial alignment to critical rejection of neoliberal adaptation. Participants started with some acceptance of messages like ‘be positive, do your part’, but through their own trials in the floods and dialogues with each other, they identified the shortcomings of those messages. They realised that emphasising individual responsibility without addressing systemic support is inadequate and



FIGURE 2 | Photograph of social marketing poster put out by the Auckland Council encouraging people to reduce their water consumption (Source: Research participant Kelly).

unfair—essentially, you can't expect people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps in a flood (literally and figuratively) when the boots are waterlogged and the ladder of support is missing rungs. The neoliberal framing of adaptation was seen as shallow and even harmful, as it risks blaming victims and letting institutions off the hook. This critical insight set the stage for participants to articulate what they believe should happen—which moves us into the final theme of youth agency and transformative visions for climate justice in adaptation.

4.3 | Youth Agency and Climate Adaptation Justice: Beyond 'Quick, Snappy Fixes'

Despite the obstacles and critiques outlined in the first two themes, our participants were not resigned or apathetic.

On the contrary, a defining aspect of their perspective is agency—they see themselves as active citizens in the climate space, capable of contributing to and even leading change. This final theme highlights how young women and gender-diverse youth are asserting their roles in climate action and articulating visions for transformative adaptation that address the shortcomings they identified. They are pushing for approaches that go beyond short-term, surface-level fixes (what Kelly called 'quick, snappy fixes') and instead prioritise equity, inclusion and long-term resilience. In doing so, they draw on their lived experience of community solidarity and their awareness of broader justice movements (youth climate activism, feminist and decolonial thinking).

Many participants described how, despite being marginalised in formal processes, they found alternative avenues to

engage with climate issues. Ashley (non-binary), despite misgendering experiences, remained extensively active in climate strikes, media engagement and advocacy. This statement is powerful—it catalogues a range of actions from protests (School Strike 4 Climate in Aotearoa was significant in 2019–2021) to media engagement and petitioning. Ashley's perseverance ('despite... discrimination') highlights a key point: youth are not passively accepting their exclusion; they are finding ways to insert themselves into the climate conversation. Both non-binary participants, Ashley and Tracey, were particularly active, arguably turning the pain of marginalisation into motivation to disrupt gender norms and institutional cultures. This aligns with the concept of insurgent citizenship (Holston 2023; Huq 2020) where those excluded push back and demand inclusion on their own terms.

Participants found solidarity in youth climate movements like School Strike 4 Climate (Jordan, Alex, Riley, Tracey), viewing themselves as stakeholders and moral actors pressing for change. Several also pointed to formal participation channels, reflecting their local political advocacy, that is, through Party policy, Union spaces and Auckland Council consultations. Others imagined what it would be like to participate in politics if they had not been actively involved already. One of these potential avenues, not specifically referred to, was the Auckland Council Youth Advisory Panel, which offers a civic platform for young people to provide policy advice to the Council on issues ranging from transport to climate action. Participants described these institutional avenues as having (or thought to have) limited influence, often advisory rather than decision-making, echoing their broader concerns about tokenism in participatory processes. The coexistence of these formal and informal spaces illustrates what scholars describe as 'youth climate citizenship' (Hayward 2020; Parsons et al. 2023): young people exercising political agency both inside and outside conventional governance frameworks. By navigating these overlapping spaces—council panels, climate strikes, digital campaigns and community activism—youth enact new forms of citizenship that challenge adultist assumptions and expand the boundaries of democratic participation in adaptation planning.

A notable sub-theme here is a rejection of apathy. While participants certainly felt climate anxiety and frustration (especially after the floods, some mentioned a sense of dread about the future), they largely did not succumb to paralysis. Instead, they channelled their emotions into demands for action. Drew states: 'I feel like there's kind of like a sweet spot where, [you] can be like, oh my gosh, this concerning thing is going happen, but I'm gonna use that to like, [make] change, and try and inspire others'. Tracey states: 'I'm not hopeful, but I'm not hopeless', noting the difficulty navigating a system not aligned with community values, yet still 'engaging ... toward ... communal goals'. This finding resonates with emerging research that many youths use their eco-anxiety as fuel for activism rather than withdrawing (Bright and Eames 2021; Ojala 2021). It also dispels a stereotype that young people are either apathetic or hopeless; our participants were neither—they were mobilised and solution-oriented, albeit sometimes exasperated.

Now, what exactly do their visions for climate justice in adaptation entail? Through discussions, participants painted a picture

of adaptation that is community-centred, long-term and just. Participants emphasised equity-driven, long-term approaches. For them, this means adaptation policies that deliberately focus on the needs of the most vulnerable and plan for the future rather than the next election cycle. Tracey cynically noted officials aim to 'ease public panic' and create a 'seem like it's better' facade, instead of tackling vulnerabilities at the root. To counter this performative action, youth argued for genuine engagement and transformational change.

Several participants (notably Jordan, Riley, Max, and Tracey) championed community partnerships with government. Jordan proposed participatory planning where officials actively engage communities through door-to-door talks, helping residents initially engage with climate change. She envisioned participatory planning where officials go out into communities, hold local talks and get them to 'buy into [some] aspect of climate change ... getting that first bite'. Tracey added that current 'community outreach' is too passive (like just advertising a public meeting and calling that done); instead, officials need to ensure 'meaningful participation... [that] include[s] people in processes in... ways where their voices are actually heard and incorporated'. This directly ties to procedural justice—it's not enough to inform communities; they must have influence. The mention of 'not just consulting... not just putting an ad in a newspaper' is telling—it shows youth see through token consultation and are calling for deeper engagement methods.

Their ideas align well with best practices in climate adaptation literature where co-production and participatory planning are encouraged (Archer 2015; Hügel and Davies 2020; Jannat and Kusakabe 2024). What is significant is that these youth arrived at such recommendations through their own reflections, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of governance for justice. In fact, Malloy and Ashcraft (2020) are invoked in our data or at least align with it: Tracey's quote about including people in ways their voices are heard echoes Malloy & Ashcraft's point that just adaptation requires moving from token public input to relational, power-sharing processes.

Another forward-looking aspect of their vision was addressing structural inequities as part of adaptation. Participants argued that adaptation cannot be separated from issues like housing affordability, poverty or racial inequality. Ashley cited the Māori proverb '*He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata*' ('It is people') to emphasise that climate justice must include justice for the homeless, low-income groups and ensuring basic human rights. Here, Ashley is explicitly linking climate justice to social justice writ large. This viewpoint resonates with the concept of just transitions, just adaptation and critical climate justice frameworks, which state that responding to climate change should simultaneously advance human rights and equity (Jasanoff 2018; Sultana 2022). Our participants see 'adaptation' not as a narrow technical project, but as an opportunity to uplift marginalised communities and rectify injustices, thereby reducing vulnerability in the process. For example, ensuring everyone has adequate housing is both a social good and a climate adaptation measure (since well-housed people are less vulnerable to storms).

Alex and Ashley offered critiques targeting systemic issues such as capitalism and colonialism. Alex argued that capitalism

is inherently anti-climate justice because it structurally prioritises profit over emission reductions. Ashley declared the capitalist system will ‘continue to fail us... because it’s intended to exploit people and resources’. These critiques fed into calls for radical change. Alex and Tracey’s calls to challenge the status quo align with scholarly calls for transformational adaptation, degrowth and critical climate justice. In fact, participants invoked concepts akin to degrowth (though not using that exact term) by arguing the current growth-centric economy is unsustainable and unjust. They also invoked decolonisation, as evidenced by Alex’s emphasis on incorporating mātauranga Māori and establishing co-governance with Māori iwi in adaptation planning. Alex noted that Auckland’s development has been predominantly informed by Western practices, and she believes that honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi, Aotearoa New Zealand’s founding document, signed in 1840 by 500 Māori chiefs and representatives of the British Crown) through co-governance is ‘really crucial’ for just outcomes, which parallels arguments made by climate justice scholars from Aotearoa including Bond et al. (2023), Jayawardena (2024) and Jones et al. (2024). This is a direct call for recognitional and procedural justice for Indigenous people. It is also a very concrete suggestion: co-governance would mean, for example, that Māori iwi (tribes) and hapū (sub-tribes) and the Auckland Council share decision-making power over adaptation projects, ensuring Indigenous perspectives and rights shape the city’s response to climate threats (Fisher and Parsons 2020).

Notably, the concepts our participants raised align closely with critical climate justice discourse (Sultana 2022; Tabassum 2021), indicating these young people are not formulating ideas in isolation. Many are drawing on knowledge and values circulated through youth climate movements, education and media (Foran et al. 2017; Ritchie 2021). For instance, global youth-led initiatives and summits have popularised calls for systemic change, making terms like ‘decolonisation’ and critiques of endless growth more commonplace in youth activism (Boulianne and Ohme 2022; O’Brien et al. 2018; Prendergast et al. 2021). Indigenous climate activism in Aotearoa and abroad (e.g., kaupapa Māori and Pacific Warrior environmental movements) has likewise brought decolonial perspectives into the mainstream of climate action (Bond et al. 2023; McNamara and Farbotko 2017; Si’isi’ialafia-Mau and Percival 2024). Thus, when our participants challenge capitalist paradigms or advocate for Māori co-governance in adaptation, they are echoing a broader repertoire of ideas gained from these contexts. This suggests that their climate justice visions are informed by engagement with wider movements and dialogues—from social media to community hui (meetings)—that promote alternatives like degrowth economics (Alexander and Gleeson 2019) and the reclaiming of Indigenous knowledge systems (Rowe et al. 2020). In short, the youth in our study are actively learning from, and contributing to, larger justice-oriented conversations, which bolsters the depth and credibility of their calls for transformative adaptation (Bond et al. 2020; Börner et al. 2021; O’Brien et al. 2018).

Finally, participants stressed that implementation of these visions requires institutional openness to change. They praised instances where local government did try new approaches, and they urged more of it. Alex commended projects that

involved trust-building with communities (citing Bond and Barth (2020) emphasis on care networks, which she resonated with by calling for trust and collaboration). Likewise, Riley stated: ‘the council needs to have more face-to-face interaction with the communities’ to combat ‘distrust between government ... and communities’. Simply put, ‘people aren’t going ... to listen unless they trust [you] and [there is] that sort of relationship’.

In essence, this theme demonstrates that our participants are not merely critiquing, but also advancing solutions. They reject adaptation-as-usual and articulate multi-dimensional changes: procedural (inclusive, participatory governance), recognitional (centring marginalised voices, Indigenous co-leadership), distributive (focus on vulnerable communities, equitable resource allocation) and structural (challenging capitalist and colonial paradigms in planning). These align with the tripartite justice model (Chu and Michael 2019; Holland 2017; Müller 2001; Parsons and Crease 2024a) and extend it. Importantly, the youth position themselves as agents of these changes—through activism, advocacy and their willingness to engage with formal adaptation planning processes if given a genuine opportunity. The optimism in this theme is cautious but present. They are realistic about the challenges (knowing the inertia in institutions), yet they exhibit a form of transformative hope (Foster 2017; Shi and Moser 2021)—a belief that things can and must change, and that they can be part of making it happen. In concluding this section, it is clear that the voices of young women and gender-diverse youth provide not just criticism of current climate adaptation efforts in Auckland, but also a blueprint for more just and effective alternatives.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

Young women and gender-diverse youth in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, are not only stakeholders in the climate future of their city, but they are also actively stakeholders in the present, with clear visions and demands for how that future should be shaped. They remind us that climate adaptation is fundamentally a climate justice challenge: it must centre people, especially those traditionally marginalised, in both process and outcomes. These youth witnesses of climate injustice are, at the same time, architects of climate-just futures. Their insistence on moving beyond tokenism and technocracy toward inclusive, community-led and care-oriented adaptation is a call that those in power would do well to heed. As Auckland and other cities worldwide strive to become more resilient, the insights of these youth demonstrate that resilience without justice is a brittle shield. Procedural justice—giving youth, women, Indigenous and other marginalised groups a real voice—and recognitional justice—respecting and empowering their identities and knowledge—are not secondary to infrastructure and climate data; they are integral to crafting effective adaptation strategies.

Our participants’ experiences demonstrate that youth perspectives on climate justice are profoundly intersectional. Their identities (as young, as women or non-binary, as students or workers) shape how they experience climate impacts and how they can participate in climate mitigation efforts as well as climate adaptation planning, alongside climate activism.

The diversity within our small sample meant that climate justice was not a one-size concept: for one participant it centred on gender inclusion, for another on Indigenous rights, for another on class and housing equity. This reinforces the importance of recognitional justice in adaptation—planners must recognise and value these different identities, knowledge systems and lived experiences. When participants called for co-governance with Māori or for listening to youth voices, they were effectively demanding recognitional justice be put into practice, complementing procedural justice (Fraser 2020; Holland 2017; Schlosberg 2003).

A key insight from our study is how procedural injustice (exclusion, tokenism) and distributive injustice (unequal vulnerabilities, insufficient support) are intertwined. The very power imbalances that keep youth and marginalised groups out of decision-making lead to adaptation policies that neglect those groups' needs, creating a vicious cycle of injustice. To break this cycle, our findings highlight the need for transformative approaches. Incremental tweaks to add a 'youth seat' or a 'gender mention' in policy will not suffice; what our participants envision is a re-framing of adaptation as a process that actively challenges power imbalances and recentres marginalised voices. This aligns with broader calls in the literature for transformative change (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Schlosberg et al. 2017), just adaptation (Shi and Moser 2021; Walker et al. 2024) and insurgent planning (Huq 2020) – essentially, adaptation as an opportunity to advance social justice and environmental justice rather than maintain the status quo.

One of the clearest practical implications of our research is the need to redesign participatory mechanisms in climate adaptation planning (Bailey et al. 2024; Tschakert et al. 2023). The youth in our study do not reject participation but demand it be meaningful. This means moving beyond token inclusion ('youth representatives' with no power, consultations that are mere formalities) to co-creative and empowered roles for young and marginalised people (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia 2015; Spajić et al. 2019).

Our findings about tokenism also serve as a cautionary tale: If institutions continue to treat youth and community input as a checkbox exercise, they risk alienating a generation of would-be collaborators (Setijanigrum et al. 2024). The fact that some of our participants chose to focus on grassroots action after negative experiences with formal processes indicates that institutional climate adaptation might lose relevance if it does not evolve. On the other hand, engaging youth as partners can tap into immense energy, creativity and public support (as seen in how youth climate strikes moved public opinion). In short, procedural innovation is not just a nice-to-have; it is essential for effective and legitimate adaptation policy in a time when public trust in institutions is delicate (Cologna and Siegrist 2020; Corner et al. 2015).

The sophisticated critiques and proposals offered by these young participants suggest that climate justice concepts are not beyond the grasp of youth; in fact, youth are actively engaging with ideas like intersectionality, procedural justice and decolonisation (Piispa and Kiilakoski 2022). This has implications for both policy and education. For policymakers, it indicates that

initiatives like Auckland's climate adaptation plans should explicitly integrate climate justice principles, not as afterthoughts but as foundational elements. Our participants noticed the absence of specifics and commitments to equity in Auckland's climate change strategy; addressing this requires policy co-design with marginalised communities and setting clear justice-oriented targets (e.g., ensuring adaptation investments benefit low-income neighbourhoods or creating quotas for youth representation in planning committees with decision power, not just advisory roles). It also means adopting indicators of success that go beyond infrastructure metrics to include measures of inclusion, community resilience and local satisfaction with processes. As one participant implied, the use of 'buzzwords' like resilience and adaptation must be backed by funding and actions.

While this study provides valuable insights, its small, urban sample means the findings should be viewed as illustrative rather than representative. Future research could extend this work by exploring youth perspectives across a wider range of social and geographic contexts—particularly rural areas or regions more directly affected by climate hazards—to understand how local conditions and intersecting identities shape adaptation priorities. Further inquiry should also include groups absent here, such as disabled youth and those less engaged in environmental action, whose experiences remain under-represented in adaptation scholarship (Alibudbud 2023; Kosanic et al. 2022). Longitudinal and participatory approaches offer especially promising directions. Long-term studies could track how youth influence adaptation policy over time as extreme events become more frequent (Mitchell and Norman 2012), while participatory action research could involve young people directly in co-designing and evaluating adaptation interventions (Godden et al. 2020). Such collaborative experiments would deepen understanding of how youth justice concerns evolve across governance contexts and accelerate the integration of youth-driven ideas into real-world adaptation practice.

In conclusion, our study illustrates that empowering young, intersectional diverse voices in climate adaptation can yield insights with relevance far beyond Tāmaki Makaurau. The participants' calls for inclusive, justice-oriented adaptation resonate with a growing global recognition that climate resilience efforts must centre equity and community agency. While rooted in a specific urban context, these findings offer transferable lessons: engaging marginalised youth as genuine partners can invigorate adaptation planning with fresh ideas, enhance public trust and ensure that initiatives address the needs of those most at risk. As cities worldwide grapple with translating ambitious climate goals into action, the visions articulated by Auckland's youth—emphasising procedural fairness, recognitional respect and structural change—serve as a blueprint for more just and effective adaptation strategies. Heeding such youth perspectives can help decision-makers everywhere move beyond technocratic 'quick fixes' toward adaptation approaches that are not only technically sound but also socially transformative.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Data Availability Statement

The data are not available as it is confidential, as per the University of Auckland's Human Participants Ethics Committee approval.

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