

Intersectional perceptions of climate justice: young women and gender-diverse perspectives and experiences of procedural justice in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Extreme weather events in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (Aotearoa New Zealand) have exposed the urgent need for inclusive climate adaptation. However, the specific experiences of young women and gender-diverse youth remain largely absent from adaptation scholarship and policy in the Global North. Utilising an intersectional framework, this research explores how these groups perceive and experience procedural justice within local climate governance. Drawing on focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and photovoice methods, we examine how intersecting subjectivities of age and gender shape participants' interactions with political spaces, ranging from formal council submissions to activist networks. Our findings reveal that despite high levels of civic engagement, participants experience systemic exclusion and tokenism, creating a sense of "mis-belonging" within the climate-resilient city. We argue that this procedural exclusion acts as a driver of maladaptation; by relying on technocratic planning that overlooks the specific housing and economic precarities faced by these groups, adaptation policies risk reproducing their vulnerability. Consequently, we conclude that effective climate action requires moving beyond "tick-box" consultation toward transformative adaptation, rooted in a politics of care that genuinely integrates intersectional youth perspectives.

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1. Introduction

The impacts of climate change, including more intense floods, tropical cyclones, droughts, heatwaves, biodiversity loss, and rising sea levels (Dryzek, Norgaard, and Schlosberg 2011; IPCC, 2022, 218; Moellendorf 2015), present a significant and multifaceted challenge for humanity. Indeed, there is now a wealth of research highlighting how certain populations are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change as well as the critical need for vulnerable groups to be able to meaningfully participate in climate adaptation

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policies, plans, and on-the-ground actions (Bulkeley and Tuts 2013; Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015; Samaddar et al. 2021). Yet, the vast majority of research that examines participation in climate adaptation decision-making processes in the Global North overlooks three social groups – women, gender-diverse people, and youth – who are classified as being highly vulnerable by climate adaptation scholars (Bee 2016; Crease, Parsons, and Fisher 2019; Gonda 2019; Johnson, Fisher, and Parsons 2022; Johnson, Parsons, and Fisher 2022; Pelling, O'Brien, and Matyas 2015; Rouse et al. 2017). Instead, scholarly attention is chiefly devoted to youth climate activists in the Global North (their motivations, perceptions, and actions) (Bowman 2020; Parsons, Bhor, and Crease 2024) and women in the Global South (the drivers of their vulnerability and adaptation actions) (Djoudi et al. 2016; MacGregor 2010; Pearse 2017; Rochette 2016).

In this exploratory study, we examine how age, gender, and other identities shape young women's and gender-diverse people's experiences and understandings of climate adaptation in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. The study is situated in the aftermath of the 2023 Auckland Anniversary floods and Cyclone Gabrielle, which exposed both the uneven impacts of climate change and the limits of existing institutional responses (Grinlinton 2023; Harrington et al. 2023). Although climate adaptation scholarship increasingly recognises that vulnerability and participation are unevenly distributed, research in the Global North still pays limited attention to young women and gender-diverse people as political actors within local adaptation planning (Bee 2016; Crease, Parsons, and Fisher 2019; Johnson, Fisher, and Parsons 2022; Mikulewicz et al. 2023). We argue that this omission matters not only because it leaves an empirical gap, but because it obscures how procedural exclusion – the marginalisation of particular groups from meaningfully shaping decisions that affect them – can produce adaptation responses that are misaligned with lived realities and therefore risk becoming maladaptive (that is, adaptation that inadvertently increases vulnerability rather than reducing it).

Procedural justice is the central lens through which we analyse these experiences. We focus on procedural justice because it concerns who is heard, who is treated as credible, and who can meaningfully shape climate decisions, rather than merely being invited to comment on them (Holland 2017; Marion Suiseeya 2020). This focus allows us to connect participation to intersectionality – the analytical insight that overlapping identities such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class jointly shape people's exposure to harm and their capacity to influence decisions (Crenshaw 1991; Mikulewicz et al. 2023) – showing how age and gender operate together to structure political capability and belonging in adaptation spaces (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Garcia and Tschakert 2022). An intersectional account of climate justice therefore attends not to single axes of disadvantage but to how these axes combine in particular places to shape who is recognised and heard. By foregrounding these dynamics from the outset, the paper contributes a localised and intersectional account of climate justice in practice rather than another abstract discussion of justice as principle.

This contribution is needed because the groups whose intersectional experiences could most illuminate climate justice in practice remain largely absent from the empirical record. The perceptions and experiences of gender-diverse people regarding climate change (be it mitigation or adaptation) and young women's and gender-diverse people's experiences of climate adaptation and understandings of climate justice are almost entirely overlooked by researchers; some studies are starting to explore girls'

involvement in climate justice movements (Huang and Bent 2022) and young women's perspectives on climate resilience (Tanner et al. 2022). The majority of existing research adopts a distinctly gender-neutral stance, despite critiques from many feminist climate scholars. For example, philosophical literature on gender and climate change has investigated how ignorance and knowledge are both shaped by power, unearthing the neutrality of climate science and economics (Moosa and Tuana 2014). Additionally, social transformations have been linked to gender relations and climate change, with clearly established documentation and theorisation of the gendered nature of climate impacts growing in the climate literature (Pearse 2017). We adopt the standpoint that gender is one subjectivity that intersects with age (alongside other subjectivities such as ethnicity, race, sexuality, class, caste, and so forth), and therefore, our youthful research participants' understandings of what constitutes climate justice and just adaptation are shaped by their age as well as their gender identities.

This focus on identity is critical because, while adaptation literature often focuses on technical resilience, such as infrastructure hardening, scholars increasingly argue that adaptation is inherently political (Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015; Nightingale et al. 2019). When specific social groups are excluded from the planning process, adaptation actions can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities, leading to "maladaptation"; maladaptation is defined as adaptation actions that, while intended to reduce risk, inadvertently increase vulnerability for specific populations or future generations (Barnett and O'Neill 2010; IPCC, 2022). This study examines this dynamic through the lens of young women and gender-diverse youth in Tāmaki Makaurau, arguing that their procedural exclusion contributes to a disconnect between official adaptation responses and lived realities.

The urgency of addressing this disconnect is underscored by recent reviews showing that climate justice scholarship still tends to invoke broad categories such as "the vulnerable" or "historically marginalised" without consistently unpacking how injustice is experienced by different communities in specific places (Walker et al. 2024). This gap lies in the uneven empirical attention given to specific communities, including gender minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and disabled people, and in the limited localised work that examines how such identities are positioned within adaptation planning in the Global North (Parsons et al. 2024). A more differentiated account of climate justice is therefore needed, one that can distinguish between communities rather than subsuming them into a single vocabulary of vulnerability.

Scholars have attempted to and continue to define and refine the meaning of climate justice and how it can be achieved, yet studies have remained focused on climate justice as a theory (Coggins et al. 2021; Diógenes-Lima et al. 2023). Notable exceptions demonstrate climate justice in practice; for example, Bond and Barth (2020) show how local adaptation initiatives can implement principles of care and justice, but overall, empirical operationalisation of climate justice principles (particularly in adaptation) remains limited (Newell et al. 2021; Schlosberg and Collins 2014). Although studies do explore the aims of global- or national-scale climate justice movements and how they conceptualise and advocate for climate justice, other scales (individual, household, local) and peoples (who may not be part of climate justice movements) are often missing from existing research (Diógenes-Lima et al. 2023).

There is a dearth of intersectionally-focused, localised research on how climate (in)justice is perceived and experienced by specific communities. In particular, young peoples'

views on integrating climate justice into local adaptation planning remain under-explored in the literature (exceptions include Amorim-Maia et al. 2024 and Godden et al. 2020). Indeed, despite the steady rise in the scope of climate justice research over the last decade, there remains a crucial lack of research exploring the experiences of young women and gender-diverse people living in urban areas in the Global North. Accordingly, this paper sets out to partially address that gap by focusing on how age, gender, and other identities intersect to inform young women's and gender-diverse individuals' understandings and experiences of climate adaptation processes in and around Tāmaki Makaurau. Procedural justice, one aspect of climate justice, focuses on the legitimacy and inclusivity of decision-making processes – a concept central to our scoping study. By amplifying the voices of those often marginalised in local-level climate governance, our investigation highlights how systemic power imbalances exclude young and gender-diverse people from meaningful participation in climate adaptation planning, which can perpetuate inequitable outcomes. Our findings highlight the need to transform participatory climate adaptation processes to include diverse voices and challenge entrenched power dynamics. We aim to provide broader insights for creating more inclusive and just climate governance frameworks.

2. Climate justice: from theory to procedural practice

A plethora of research explores climate justice as a theory, movement, and foundational principle that can (or should) guide climate policies, financing, and on-the-ground actions. There are multiple interpretations of what constitutes climate justice, guided by different ontological, philosophical, and theoretical orientations (Schlosberg and Collins 2014). Evidently, there is no singular or universal definition of climate justice (Boran 2019; Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Sultana 2022; Zimm et al. 2024). Theories of climate justice focus on “ideals” associated with justice principles; however, adaptation is a response to a non-ideal circumstance (Byskov et al. 2021). Therefore, Byskov et al. (2021) raise the question of what the relationship between justice theory and adaptation is and what justice needs from adaptation practice. Nearly two decades ago, Adger et al. (2006) observed that justice in climate adaptation had not yet been effectively assessed in practice. Coggins et al. (2021) argue that this diagnosis still largely holds, because scholarship has grown conceptually faster than the empirical tools used to evaluate justice and equity in adaptation processes. Their point is not that climate justice research has stalled, but that the operationalisation of justice remains underdeveloped. This paper responds to that problem by examining how procedural justice is experienced and interpreted by a specific group of participants in a particular urban adaptation context.

Climate justice is seen to encompass multiple dimensions, including distributive, recognitional, intergenerational, procedural, multispecies, and corrective justice (Newell et al. 2021; Schlosberg 2012; Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Tschakert et al. 2021). While these dimensions are interconnected, this study focuses on procedural justice as it is most relevant to participants' experiences of climate risks and adaptation. This focus links with recent scholarship emphasising that adaptation is not just a technical endeavour but a sociopolitical process of governing change; one that must explicitly address power and inclusion (Nightingale et al. 2019, 2022). Procedural justice emphasises fairness and legitimacy within decision-making processes, particularly the meaningful inclusion of

marginalised social groups (Crease, Parsons, and Fisher 2019; Marion Suiseeya 2020). As Holland (2017) points out, there is a critical need to evaluate adaptation politics in relation to whether vulnerable populations possess both the political capability and power to influence climate policy and governance. Procedural justice is not a singular outcome, but rather aspirational, meaning it requires continual advancement, even if mechanisms exist to support its implementation and long-term continuance: “there is no end, only a means” (Marion Suiseeya 2020, 39).

2.1. Climate adaptation and the need for care

Climate adaptation planning is frequently criticised for privileging technocratic and managerial responses that leave underlying inequalities intact (Juhola et al. 2022; Porter et al. 2020). Within this literature, just adaptation refers to more than effective risk reduction; it also requires addressing structural injustice and enabling marginalised communities to exercise real agency in shaping policy and practice (Malloy and Ashcraft 2020; Schlosberg, Collins, and Niemeyer 2017). Scholars of urban climate justice further argue that care and relationality matter because adaptation is lived through social relations of dependence, reciprocity, and responsibility rather than through infrastructure alone (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022; Bond and Barth 2020). For that reason, procedural design is crucial: if participation is tokenistic, the relational and justice-oriented aspirations of adaptation are undermined at the outset.

A recurring problem is that public participation is often fragmented, one-off, or symbolic. Such processes can further alienate those already marginalised, especially when institutions seek legitimacy from consultation without redistributing agenda-setting power or decision-making authority (Alam et al. 2022; Garcia et al. 2022; Newell et al. 2021; Venn 2019). Procedural equity therefore depends on more than the opportunity to speak; it depends on whether participants are treated with credibility, whether processes build trust, and whether people can influence outcomes in substantive ways (Fitzgerald 2022; Thew, Midlemis, and Paavola 2020). This is why the present study treats exclusion not as a side issue of participation, but as central to how climate adaptation is imagined and enacted.

2.2. Intersectionality and the risk of maladaptation

Intersectionality draws attention to how overlapping identities such as age, gender, ethnicity, tenure, and class shape people’s exposure to harm, their capacity to respond, and their ability to influence public decisions (Crenshaw 1991; Mikulewicz et al. 2023). In climate adaptation, these differences matter because planning processes often treat categories such as “youth” or “women” as internally uniform, thereby obscuring the unequal ways in which risk and political voice are distributed (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022). One consequence of this erasure is what Shokry, Anguelovski, and Connolly (2025) describe as mis-belonging: people are materially present within the climate-vulnerable city but remain politically peripheral to the strategies designed to secure it. When this occurs, adaptation readily defaults to standardisable technical fixes, because the complex, situated needs of those at the margins have already been screened out of the planning frame.

This dynamic is also central to maladaptation. Maladaptation does not arise only when engineering fails; it also arises when adaptation is designed around privileged

subjectivities and therefore rebounds on, or shifts vulnerability onto, those with less power (Barnett and O'Neill 2010; Schipper 2020). Research on climate adaptation plans shows that procedural justice is often the weakest dimension of planning, with marginalised groups typically engaged through one-off consultation and with little attention to the possible negative effects of proposed strategies (Brousseau et al. 2024). In settler-colonial and neoliberal contexts, infrastructural or market-led adaptation can exacerbate existing inequalities when it assumes homeownership, financial flexibility, or normative family arrangements, as shown in work on Māori women and water storage adaptation in Aotearoa (Johnson, Parsons, and Fisher 2023).

An intersectional approach is therefore necessary not only for describing difference, but for identifying how exclusion becomes materially consequential. If planning ignores who can access housing, transport, emergency support, or decision-making, then interventions that appear neutral can entrench vulnerability for groups while protecting others (Johnson, Parsons, and Fisher 2023; Schipper 2020). This is the link between intersectionality and climate justice that the present article investigates. We examine how young women and gender-diverse people in Tāmaki Makaurau interpret these dynamics and how they relate them to the procedural failures of current adaptation practice.

2.3. Intersectional readings of procedural (in)justices

Procedural justice cannot be understood without exploring the underlying power dynamics that shape participation in planning and governance (Amorim-Maia et al. 2022). Marion Suiseeya (2020), for instance, identifies latent power – the cultural and ideological norms that underpin governance systems – as a significant constraint on achieving procedural justice. These norms often privilege dominant social groups (such as older, male, and wealthier individuals), while marginalising those individuals and groups who do not conform to these identities. The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2009) is specifically relevant in this context, as it highlights how dominant masculinised norms and practices dominate political spaces.

As MacGregor (2020) argues, these norms reinforce gendered hierarchies, which make it difficult for women to participate as equals. Gendered hierarchies are further compounded by age-based hierarchies that treat youth as less credible political actors (Hayward 2021). For instance, Bowman (2020) documents how youth voices are often dismissed in governance processes because societal norms equate age with experience and expertise. Similarly, Lau et al. (2021) note that gendered stereotypes, such as the perception of women as less knowledgeable or authoritative, can limit women's capacities to participate in climate adaptation decision-making. This double marginalisation means that young women and gender-diverse youth often find themselves at a procedural disadvantage in climate governance spaces. However, Lau et al. (2021) and Venn (2019) contend that even when women are included in policies, climate organisations, and adaptation projects, there is a need to distinguish whether participation is solely about increasing numbers to meet a quota or aims to empower and benefit the marginalised.

These concerns also clarify why transformative adaptation matters. Transformative adaptation differs from incremental or techno-managerial adjustment because it seeks to alter the social and institutional relations that produce vulnerability, rather than

merely protecting existing arrangements from climate impacts (Gillard et al. 2016; Henrique and Tschakert 2021). In practice, this means moving beyond short-term projects or expert-led fixes toward approaches that redistribute power, recognise excluded knowledges, and address the path dependencies through which injustice is reproduced (Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés, and Marquet 2023; Newell et al. 2021). In the present study, participants' demands for community-led, care-centred (Bond and Barth 2020), and more accountable climate action are read as calls for this more transformative form of adaptation (Henrique and Tschakert 2021).

3. Methodology

Our study employed photovoice, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions of eight young women and two gender-diverse individuals regarding climate adaptation and climate justice. These methods were selected for their capacity to capture rich, experiential qualitative data and to foster meaningful engagement with the research themes. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling methods. We disseminated a call for participation through university student networks, social media, and community youth organisations in Tāmaki Makaurau, inviting young people aged 18–25 to take part. Ten respondents (eight young women and two gender-diverse youth) volunteered, forming our participant group.

3.1. Study context: adaptation governance in Aotearoa

Aotearoa New Zealand's climate adaptation governance is shaped by its bicultural foundation under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) (Orange 2015; Waitangi Tribunal, 2014). This treaty establishes a partnership between the Crown and Māori (the Indigenous people of Aotearoa), implying that procedural justice in adaptation should include Māori leadership and knowledge. (Name withheld for review purposes) argues that just adaptation in a settler-colonial society requires actively incorporating Māori knowledge, values, and leadership into planning, and ensuring that Indigenous communities are treated as partners with decision-making power. At the local level, Auckland Council's climate strategy reflects these principles (Auckland Council, 2020), embedding equity, te ao Māori (Māori worldviews), and a strong rangatahi (youth) voice in its response. However, even with such formal commitments, adaptation planning often falls short in practice. Our participants' experiences occurred within a policy environment that professes youth inclusion, yet they still felt excluded – highlighting a gap between policy intent and reality. Notably, Auckland Council's recent climate plan development included targeted engagement of younger Aucklanders, Māori, and Pacific communities, which received a positive response. Nevertheless, the continued marginalisation described by our participants suggests that current engagement efforts may not fully empower young women and gender-diverse youth who are participating in these climate policy spaces.

Our study period coincided with two major climate-related disasters in early 2023. Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland was struck by the Auckland Anniversary floods in January 2023 and Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023. Both events caused widespread damage and revealed significant deficiencies in existing adaptation measures. They also provided

a stark backdrop for our participants' reflections, with many referring to these crises when explaining why systemic changes in adaptation planning are necessary.

Despite our broad recruitment efforts, none of our ten participants identified as Māori or Pacific, leaving those perspectives unrepresented in our study. Our snowball sampling through university networks, social media, and youth organisations likely failed to reach many Māori and Pacific youth, partly because these channels are predominantly Pākehā (non-Indigenous) spaces (Chilisa 2019; Dodson and Papoutsaki 2017). We also recognise systemic and methodological barriers that may have discouraged Māori and Pacific participation: these communities have been extensively researched, leading to research fatigue and wariness toward new studies, and our chosen methods may not have felt culturally accessible or relevant to those youth (Barlo et al. 2021; Dodson and Papoutsaki 2017; Selak et al. 2013; Smith 2013). We were mindful of these power imbalances and of the legacy of extractive research that contributes to Indigenous communities' reluctance to participate, but overcoming such barriers was beyond our project's scope. 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. Ultimately, our theoretical framework recognises that confronting colonial inequalities is a prerequisite for just adaptation in Aotearoa.

We selected photovoice to allow participants to visually express their experiences and insights, inspired by the work of Asaba et al. (2024), who emphasise the unique consciousness and depth that imagery can offer. Photovoice is a participatory visual method in which participants use photography to capture aspects of their lives or perspectives for later discussion (Wang and Burris 1997). Visual imagery provided different kinds of information and helped to foster discussion (Asaba et al. 2024; Germaine and Bowman 2021). Three participants took part in the photovoice exercise and were provided with three prompts to guide their photography:

- A photo symbolising the social expectations or norms in their daily lives.
- A photo representing the experience of being a young gender-diverse person or young woman in the context of climate change.
- A photo capturing a successful or unsuccessful example of community climate adaptation.

After approximately two weeks of taking photographs, participants reconvened in a focus group to share and discuss their images. Photovoice enriched the research by enabling participants to engage with their emotions and articulate their understandings of climate change adaptation and climate justice creatively and reflectively. We used photovoice alongside both focus groups and semi-structured interviews to employ a diversity of formats.

Two 90-minute focus groups were also conducted with the same set of four participants who participated in the photovoice exercise. In these group discussions, a semi-structured guide first elicited participants' general thoughts on climate change in Auckland (including any personal experiences with recent extreme weather events) and

then prompted dialogue about their definitions of climate (in)justice and whether they felt young people like themselves have a voice in climate decision-making. The interactive nature of focus groups, as noted by Bagnoli and Clark (2010) and Conradson (2013), fostered in-depth discussions and idea-sharing among participants. According to Conradson (2013), the ideal group size for a focus group is between four and ten participants. Our focus groups involved four participants, but one member was unable to attend the second session (the photovoice debrief), leaving three participants. The small size ultimately proved beneficial for our study, as it allowed participants to delve into more personal and in-depth discussions. Our experience fits with the work of Krueger and Casey (2015), who found that smaller focus groups are well-suited to sensitive topics, ensuring equal opportunity for all participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

To complement the focus groups and address our challenges of participant recruitment, six additional participants were interviewed individually in February 2023 (see Table 1). Semi-structured interviews enabled these participants to explore their views and experiences in depth, freeing them from the influence of group dynamics. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 min, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions covered similar themes as in the focus groups – probing personal climate change concerns, experiences of inclusion or exclusion, perceptions of fairness in who is most affected by climate impacts versus who holds decision-making power, and reflections on how their age, gender, or cultural background shaped their experiences. The combination of focus groups and interviews allowed for data triangulation, which enhanced the richness and validity of the findings (Lambert and Loiselle 2008). The interviews offered a more individualised perspective, while the focus groups were shaped by the social interactions between participants.

All participants provided written informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms in transcripts and in the manuscript. For the focus groups, participants were also told that, although the research team would anonymise all records, confidentiality within the group could not be fully guaranteed. At the start of each session, participants therefore agreed to keep other participants' contributions private and not repeat identifiable information outside the group setting. Given the sensitive nature of discussions about identity and exclusion, participants were also reminded that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw material they no longer wished to share.

Table 1. Research participants and the methods in which they participated.

Research participants and the methods in which they participated	Research participants and the methods in which they participated	Research participants and the methods in which they participated	Research participants and the methods in which they participated	Research participants and the methods in which they participated
F1	Female	X	X	–
F2	Female	X	X	–
F3	Female	X	–	–
F4	Female	–	–	X
F5	Female	–	–	X
F6	Female	–	–	X
F7	Female	–	–	X
F8	Female	–	–	X
NB1	Non-binary	X	X	–
NB2	Non-binary	–	–	X

"X" indicates participation in the method; "–" indicates no participation in that method.

The collected data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. This method involves systematically identifying and interpreting patterns across the dataset while emphasising the researchers' reflexivity and the situated nature of the analysis. The six phases of thematic analysis (familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up) guided the analytical process, with a focus on valuing lived experiences and participant voices (Braun and Clarke 2022). The lead author conducted all data collection and the majority of the analysis, thus it is important to reflect on their positionality:

As a young, middle-class, New Zealand European woman, I accept that I hold many privileges that advantage my position in society. I identify as heterosexual, a critical facet of my self-identity to reflect on in this study. I involved young women and young gender-diverse individuals who may also identify as LGBTQIA+, and as heteronormativity is "naturalised" in the gender order (Winker and Degele 2011), there was a power imbalance present in the research. My age (mid-twenties), gender (woman), and sexuality (heterosexual) may have led to intertwined power dynamics not easily seen in the research process. Being of a similar age and gender to participants may have provided a greater rapport of trust, yet importantly with regard to unseen power, I may have carried an internalised "naturalisation" of heteronormativity in society as a heterosexual person myself. Attention to reflexivity throughout this study seeks to identify this, however as this study contests, discourses are not always easily seen. (Lead Author)

The other co-authors, both middle-aged Māori/Pākehā women (both of mixed heritage), served as mentors to the lead author, assisting with research design, data analysis, and write-up. During analysis, we paid special attention to how age and gender intersected in participants' narratives. We explicitly noted where these subjectivities were mentioned together and mapped emergent themes to examine how participants' age and gender influenced their experiences of power or exclusion. This reflexive, intersectional approach ensured that our analysis captured not only single-axis issues (e.g. "youth" or "women" in isolation), but also the compounded effects of being both young and female or gender-diverse in our participants' accounts.

The participants in our study ranged in age from 18 to 24, with most identifying as students. Of the ten participants, six identified as female (denoted F) and two as non-binary (NB). Participants' ethnicities included Malaysian Chinese (three participants), Chinese (one), New Zealand European/Pākehā (four), half Sri Lankan-half Pākehā (one), and Indian-Croatian (one). Across the focus groups and interviews, participants expressed a strong passion for social justice and the environment, and balanced their hope and fear for the future.

4. Results and discussion

Our findings situate participants' experiences and perceptions of climate justice within four interrelated themes. We examine how youth participants frame climate justice through procedural justice, distinguishing between tokenistic participation and meaningful political capability. We further explore how intersecting identities – specifically age and gender – create distinct barriers to engagement, often manifesting as feelings of "mis-belonging" in climate governance spaces (Shokry, Anguelovski, and Connolly 2025). Finally, we analyse participants' visions for transformative adaptation,

which critique short-term techno-managerial fixes in favour of systemic, community-led care.

4.1. Intersectionality and the lived experience of climate precarity

Participants' experiences with extreme weather events demonstrated that vulnerability is not merely a physical state but a social production shaped by intersecting subjectivities. These identities (including gender, age, and socioeconomic status) influenced their perceptions of their preparedness for and their capacity to recover from flooding and other climate-related extremes (Mikulewicz et al. 2023). For example, F4 noted that being "connected to [her] community" was critical for "being prepared," validating the argument that social capital is a primary adaptation asset for marginalised groups.

However, the limits of reliance on community resilience were starkly evident in participants' accounts of adaptation failure. F6, who was displaced during the Tāmaki Makaurau floods, described a total collapse of official support systems:

"It was very stressful, [we had to] find like a temporary place to live and then Civil Defence weren't very helpful either [...] no one wanted to help with accommodation, so we just had to find somewhere ourselves." (F6)

This experience highlights a critical gap in adaptation planning: official frameworks often assume a normative subject, typically a homeowner with resources and stability. For young renters like F6, these frameworks fail, rendering the state's adaptation response maladaptive for this demographic. This disconnect exemplifies what Shokry, Anguelovski, and Connolly (2025) describe as "mis-belonging," where racialised or economically marginalised residents are physically present in the climate-resilient city but politically and socially excluded from its protections. By relying on individuals to "find somewhere ourselves," the state implicitly offloads the burden of resilience onto those with the least capacity to bear it. F4 further complicated this picture by noting that gendered expectations often force women into roles of "compassionate" carers during crises, while F2 feared being "coddled" or relegated to the role of "the cook" or the "child protector". These accounts confirm that adaptation planning must move beyond treating "youth" or "women" as homogeneous categories, and instead, address the specific, intersectional subjectivities that dictate who is deemed worthy of state protection (Mikulewicz et al. 2023).

4.2. Procedural justice and the exclusionary politics of expertise

To understand where procedural justice is failing, it is necessary to situate the participants' experiences within the specific political arenas they navigate. Participants described a high degree of civic activity, engaging across a spectrum of formal and informal spaces. This activity included formal local government processes, such as making written submissions to the government (NB2) and attending consultation workshops. Beyond these institutional channels, participants were deeply embedded in collective and activist organisations. For example, NB2 described their leadership role in a union and their active involvement in organising intergenerational climate strikes. Others, like F7, reflected on their engagement in street protests, noting a sense of futility where such actions "don't do very much" to shift power. The breadth of this engagement –

spanning unions, NGOs, protests, and formal council submissions – demonstrates that these youth are not politically apathetic. Rather, their sense of exclusion stems from a procedural disconnect where, despite their active membership in these collective bodies, their voices remain marginalised in specific adaptation decision-making.

Procedural justice is often treated as a “tick-box” exercise of inclusion. However, our findings show that even when present, young women and gender-diverse youth face “interlocking” barriers of ageism and sexism. F5 articulated this synergy clearly:

“Sometimes I feel like age [...] a lot of decisions made by like, old dudes ... [I] remember when I interned somewhere, and a lot of the people, the demographic there was very old, very, like, Caucasian.” (F5)

Here, the intersection of age, gender, and ethnicity creates a specific form of exclusion. F5 is not simply disregarded because she is young; rather, she encounters an adaptation arena whose authority is coded as older, professionally expert, male, and Pākehā. Read in this way, her account extends Hall’s (2021) critique of Aotearoa New Zealand’s technocratic climate governance by showing how expertise is embodied through particular demographic norms as well as institutional practices. The issue is therefore not just that technocratic governance is expert-led, but that the figure of the “expert” is socially recognisable to some participants and alienating to others.

NB1 observed that even when women were welcomed into these spaces, it often reinforced existing hierarchies:

“[When] women are welcome to share their voice, it’s usually shaped in a way which puts men on a pedestal [too] because they ascend as like, heroic [...] [for] giving up some power.” (NB1)

This critique highlights a phenomenon that Bridges and Pascoe (2018a, 2018b) identify as hybrid masculinity, where dominant groups adopt inclusive rhetoric that ultimately preserves their hegemonic status. By framing inclusion as a benevolent gift from men, the structure of power remains unchallenged, and women or gender-diverse individuals remain “guests” in the political sphere rather than equal owners of it. While a deeper analysis of the specific mechanisms of political engagement in these spaces is detailed elsewhere (May, Parsons, and Fisher 2026), the evidence here suggests that intersectional identity inequities delegitimise the voices of those who cannot access such power (Ryder 2018). Therefore, procedural justice in Tāmaki Makaurau must be actively advanced to dismantle these hierarchies of expertise, ensuring that youth contributions are viewed as valid knowledge rather than decorative diversity.

4.3. Awareness, advocacy, and the “cage” of intersectional barriers

Intersectional identities profoundly shaped how participants navigated advocacy, often resulting in burnout or feelings of entrapment. While some participants (F7, F8) felt their age was not a barrier, those deeply embedded in political movements described a heavy emotional toll. F1 and F2 discussed how their youth led to their input being undervalued, with F1 noting that people only value their voice when it is “too late.” Addressing the ambiguity of youth agency, F2 expanded on this dynamic, describing the pressure young people feel to be constantly active to counter the dismissive assumption that their inaction stems from incompetence. She explained that youth are forced to over-perform “because [otherwise the assumption is] we’re not smart, [or] we’re not

experienced enough” (F2). This exertion represents a form of invisible “labour” in climate activism, where youth must constantly prove their worthiness to participate (Wrigley et al. 2025a, 2025b).

The psychological toll of navigating these exclusionary spaces was vividly captured by NB1 during the photovoice entry of a cage. Presenting an image of a cage, NB1 reflected on the compounding barriers of being gender-diverse in a binary political system:

“I took a photo because there’s like a cage kind of situation. [...] Because I’m gender-diverse, being in the current climate change context is like being in this cage – I can’t get out unless someone, a man, on the other side, opens it.” (NB1)

This metaphor (shown in [Figure 1](#)) powerfully illustrates the limits of current “inclusive” adaptation planning from NB1’s perspective. While youth are invited to consult, the “gate” to decision-making power remains controlled by hegemonic masculinity (the “man on the other side”). Bond, Thomas, and Diprose (2023) argue that true climate adaptation justice requires dismantling these colonial and patriarchal gatekeeping structures. For NB1, the adaptation challenge is not just rising sea levels, but the rigid political structures that prevent them from advocating for their community’s specific needs.

4.4. Responsibility and the rejection of maladaptation

Participants advocated for a radical departure from current adaptation strategies, critiquing them as reactionary and symptomatic of broader systemic failures. F2 criticised the council’s efforts as “short-term, ... snappy fixes” (e.g. the construction of new or the reinforcement of existing flood levees and seawalls), which prioritised visible infrastructure over long-term social equity, potentially locking in vulnerabilities for future generations (Shokry, Anguelovski, and Connolly 2025). Participants’ critique of “short term ... snappy fixes” can be understood as highlighting their fears of maladaptation – a sentiment echoed in recent IPCC (2022) reports – rather than a rejection of adaptation per se. Participants’ concern was that infrastructure-first responses and procedural exclusion were being combined in ways that protected institutional authority more readily than lived vulnerability. When adaptation is organised around a normative homeowner, a stable household, or a technically legible citizen, it can miss those whose exposure is mediated by renting, precarious housing, gendered care responsibilities, or distrust of formal institutions. In that sense, exclusion of intersectional subjectivities does not automatically equal maladaptation, but it materially increases its likelihood because policies are then designed without the knowledge needed to avoid shifting or reproducing vulnerability (Brousseau et al. 2024; Schipper 2020).

This is where participants’ calls for community-led change point toward transformative adaptation (F2, NB1). Rather than asking only for better consultation, they call for different criteria of adaptation success: accountability, care, shared decision-making, and attention to the root causes of vulnerability. NB2’s call for climate justice is widespread and extends beyond the status quo:

he aha te mea nui o te ao, he tangata, he tangata he tangata. Right, the most important thing in the world is people, is people, is people. ... There are people throughout history who have engaged [in] sustainable practices forever, and [I] think that we can [engage] in a process of degrowth. Like we have enough in [our] economy to [redistribute] our wealth. ... Like climate justice also means like justice for like homeless people, it means justice for low-income people ...



Figure 1. Photograph of a cage in the back of a van. Taken by NB1 in early 2023.

Such demands resonate with scholarship arguing that just transitions and transformative adaptation must challenge the dominant pathways through which expert-led and top-down interventions lock inequity into climate responses (Gillard et al. 2016; Henrique and Tschakert 2021; Newell et al. 2021). The significance of these findings is therefore twofold: they show how procedural exclusion can foster maladaptive outcomes, and they demonstrate why more transformative, power-redistributive approaches are necessary.

Accordingly, our findings suggest that procedural exclusion is not only a democratic deficit but also a substantive adaptation risk. Civil Defence responses that assume self-provision, consultations that do not share agenda-setting power, and infrastructure decisions that sideline renters and gender-diverse youth all illustrate how policy can remain formally responsive while functionally exclusionary. If such patterns persist, they will continue to lock vulnerability into the city's adaptation pathway, particularly for those already positioned at the margins of housing, care, and political recognition. Avoiding maladaptation, therefore, requires not only better technical design, but also more transformative governance that redistributes whose knowledge counts and who gets to decide.

5. Conclusion

We embarked on this research recognising an alarming gap: the near absence of young women and gender-diverse perspectives in Global North climate adaptation literature. Whilst there is a growing collective call on youth to take responsibility for leading the future, assumptions of youth homogeneity persist. These assumptions motivated us to create a study that foregrounds young women and gender-diverse people, challenging the notion that “youth” is a uniform category (see, for example, Bowman 2020, 2022; Germaine and Bowman 2021). Our research illustrates that, for most participants, intersecting identities of age and gender constrained their engagement in climate adaptation planning. Young women and non-binary youth in Tāmaki Makaurau experienced procedural injustices (from tokenistic consultation to outright exclusion) that prevented them from influencing decisions affecting their futures. At the same time, participants demonstrated agency by critiquing the status quo and envisioning more equitable alternatives, such as community-led adaptation and shared governance.

Future research must continue to dismantle the monolithic category of “youth” by exploring how other intersecting subjectivities, such as disability, class, and ethnicity, further complicate experiences of climate adaptation in urban environments. While this study focused on the perceptions of young women and gender-diverse people, there is a critical need for longitudinal research that tracks the long-term impacts of procedural exclusion on trust in democratic institutions. Additionally, scholars should investigate the efficacy of specific participatory mechanisms – such as citizen assemblies, knowledge co-production, or youth co-governance models – to determine if they successfully mitigate the risks of maladaptation identified here (van Blerk et al. 2023). By continuing to examine who is excluded from the “climate resilient city” (Shokry, Anguelovski, and Connolly 2025), researchers can help chart a path toward adaptation planning that is not only effective but fundamentally just.

Disclosure statement

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