‘World designed by men has destroyed many things,’ Cop26 warned
Climate crisis cannot be ended without the empowerment of women, politicians and campaigners tell summit

“The world as designed by men has destroyed many things,” Cop26 delegates have been told, as leaders and campaigners warned that the climate crisis could not be ended without the empowerment of women.

Women and girls around the world suffer disproportionately from the impacts of climate breakdown, as they are on average poorer, less educated and more dependent on subsistence farming. A UN report found 80% of those displaced by the climate emergency are women.

The focus on gender equality on Tuesday saw indigenous women and politicians including Scotland’s first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the US House of Representatives, demand increased investment.
Angelica Ponce, executive director of the Plurinational Authority for Mother Earth in Bolivia, said: “The world as designed by men has destroyed many things. The world should begin thinking like women. If it was designed by a woman, it would end violence against women and children.

“We want to be in the corridors of power and take part in decisions at international level to end this struggle of climate justice,” she said. “As indigenous women, we live day-by-day the cruel reality of climate change in our land.”

Sturgeon said: “When world leaders gathered here last week, of the 120 or so, a tiny minority were women – that needs to change and it needs to change quickly. There is no doubt, we must ensure that climate change is a feminist issue. [But] women are not pleading to be supported. We’re demanding to be empowered.”

Alok Sharma, the UK minister and president of Cop26, said: “We know from our efforts to tackle climate change that it is more effective when we put women and girls at the heart of those efforts.”

Climate-related events will prevent at least 4 million girls in lower-income countries from completing their education in 2021, he said, citing a Malala Fund report. On current trends, the climate crisis will contribute to at least 12.5 million girls not completing their education each year, the report said.

“That is an absolute travesty and a dangerous one,” Sharma said. “Because, as well as being a fundamental good in itself, education empowers girls and equips them to deal with the effects of climate change and to take climate action.” He announced that the UK was giving £165m to tackle climate change while addressing gender inequalities.

Per Olsson Fridh, Sweden’s minister for international development cooperation, told Cop26: “Women are not the polluters of this world, yet, they carry the consequences of climate change on their shoulders. Without a gender perspective, we miss out on invaluable knowledge needed for a sustainable green transition. A feminist approach is simply the only smart thing to do.”
Pelosi said: “If I ruled the world, the one thing that I would do is invest in the education of women. When women succeed, the world succeeds.”

Åsa Regnér, from UN Women, said: “Only 3% of the climate overseas development aid actually targets women’s rights and gender equality specifically. The UN, with its convening power, should really address that because as long as we don’t have the resources, little will happen.”

Some countries announced the climate projects they funded would have to incorporate gender equality. Patricia Fuller, Canada’s climate change ambassador, said: “As part of the doubling of Canada’s climate finance pledge to C$5.3bn (£3.1bn) over five years, Canada will apply the target of 80% for projects that will target gender equality outcomes. If we are to win the fight against climate change, we need to have women participating equally in climate action.”

Germany also announced that gender justice was to become a “guiding principle” for its €4.5bn (£3.8bn) International Climate Initiative.

Diaka Selena Koroma, an ActionAid climate activist from Sierra Leone, witnessed the devastating mudslides that hit Freetown in 2017 and was meant to attend Cop26, but her visa did not arrive in time.

“If women and young people who are most affected by climate impacts are not represented at platforms like Cop26, leaders will not feel the pressure to commit to climate targets,” she said.

Sophie Rigg, also at ActionAid UK, said: “It is all well and good hosting a dedicated ‘gender day’, but the UK government must commit to making sure that all UK financing on climate also tackles gender inequality.”

Sharma said: “We have the [UN climate convention’s] Gender Action Plan, agreed back in 2019. But what we actually need is for every single country to implement this plan and to be guided by the UN Women-convened Feminist Action for Climate Justice Coalition, which launched earlier this year.”