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A woman passes by a #COP29 sign during the U.N. climate change conference COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, Nov. 11, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Maxim Shemetov)



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Baku, Azerbaijan — November 22, 2024

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Throughout the nearly two weeks of the COP29 climate talks in Baku, Azerbaijan, religious sisters and women's organizations have worked to ensure decisions made on climate finances adequately address the unique needs of women and girls.

Nearly 200 countries here at the United Nations climate change conference, known as COP29, have been working to establish a new monetary target for funding climate responses in developing countries, from transitioning to clean energy to adapting and recovering from climate-related disasters.

The summit was scheduled to end Nov. 22. Late that day in Baku, the closing plenary was delayed, suggesting the conference would extend for an undetermined amount of time.

Discussions about the precise amount, who will pay, the form of the funding and the methods to deliver it remained contentious. Developing countries have advocated for at least $1.3 trillion per year from developed nations, banks and the private sector.

While a draft text issued Nov. 22 "calls for" the $1.3 trillion figure, developing countries and their allies said that language was too vague and unreliable. And the more defined proposal of $250 billion per year by 2035 from publica and private sources was too little and not guaranteed debt-free.

The new financing target is designed to supplant the goal set in 2009 of $100 billion annually by 2020. That target was reportedly reached two years late in 2022.

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Sisters attending the U.N. climate summit have observed frustration with the slow pace emerging from the negotiation rooms.

"I am not liking what I am learning," Maryknoll Sr. Margaret Lacson said of the climate finance discussions. She told EarthBeat she has heard in numerous side events concerns that the U.N. gathering is not responding to issues facing countries most vulnerable to a warming world.

"I do not like the atmosphere of 'begging' for money by those who are most affected by climate change from those who are greatly responsible for causing it," she added. "I like the attitude of some Indigenous who say, 'This is not charity, this is only what is due to us.' "

One area where more resources are urgent, sisters say, is around women and girls.

Climate change, they said, not only worsens existing gender inequalities but also endangers the rights, livelihoods, health and overall well-being of women and girls.

According to the anti-poverty organization ActionAid, women make up 80% of people displaced by climate-related disasters. Being forced to leave their homes make them more vulnerable to early marriage, sexual abuse and trafficking. Greater dependency on the land for food and income also makes women more at risk from stronger, extreme heatwaves, droughts and storms.

In a statement made Nov. 21, "Gender Day" at COP29, U.N. Women called for finance decisions to address the specific needs of women. It highlighted that under worst-case climate scenarios, 158 million additional women and girls could be pushed into poverty, 16 million higher than their male counterparts.

"The climate crisis is not gender-neutral. Women and girls disproportionately bear the brunt of climate change, yet their voices remain largely underrepresented in climate decision-making," Jemimah Njuki, U.N. Women's chief of women's economic empowerment, said in the statement. "We need financing to go to addressing gender inequalities and to go to grassroots women's organizations."



Lisa Sullivan, an Integral Ecology senior program officer for the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns is pictured during the demonstrations at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, on Nov. 11-22. (NCR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

According to U.N. Women, only 3% of climate-related development assistance in 2022 included objectives aimed at promoting gender equality. This was despite women playing crucial roles in climate resilience efforts across the globe, leading initiatives in sustainable agriculture, water management and disaster response. The U.N. organization said gender-responsive finance is vital for effective climate action, and that equitable access to resources, opportunities and decision-making can empower women.

Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Jean Quinn, executive director of UNANIMA International, told EarthBeat that at COP29 they "have been advocating for gender equality as a cornerstone of environmental justice," and that "the on-ground realities of women and girls are not cast aside or limited" to a single thematic day at the conference.

In a COP29 policy paper, UNANIMA, which represents 23 women religious congregations in 100 countries, said that climate emergencies and other crises have tended to widen the gender gap in social protection, particularly for women and girls in the Global South. Climate change, UNANIMA said, presents another barrier for them, in addition to unequal access to education, employment and health care.

In efforts to address climate change, UNANIMA highlighted the critical importance of a just transition that empowers vulnerable communities, including women, with the resources they need to shift away from fossil fuel dependence. This transition must be fair and equitable, she said, adding that women, who often work in the informal sector and are engaged in low-paid care roles, frequently miss out on essential social protection benefits tied to formal employment.

"If you shut down a coal plant and compensate just the formal workers, you fail to address the needs of the people whose livelihoods rely on the facility through informal work — women who provide childcare for the coal workers, women who sell food outside of the plant, women who gather abandoned coal from around mine sites," UNANIMA said in its position paper.

At one point at COP29, the Vatican was in the middle of a dispute over gender issues.

In negotiations updating an action plan on women and climate, some countries proposed language to acknowledge that experience of climate change differed for women based on "gender, sex, age and race."

> "There is increasing recognition that the three COPs — climate change, biodiversity and desertification — should be considered in relation to one another to create a more holistic approach for addressing the challenges facing our planet."
>
> — Maryknoll Sr. Margaret Lacson

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The BBC reported Nov. 21 that the Holy See — which became an official party to the Paris Agreement in 2022 — joined Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran and Egypt opposing the reference to "gender" over concerns it was a reference to transgender women.

A Vatican spokesperson told the BBC it was important to seek a text that recognized the disproportionate ways climate change impacts women and girls, and that it "hopes that consensus will be reached, with respect for the sensitivities of each participating State and in a language acceptable to all."

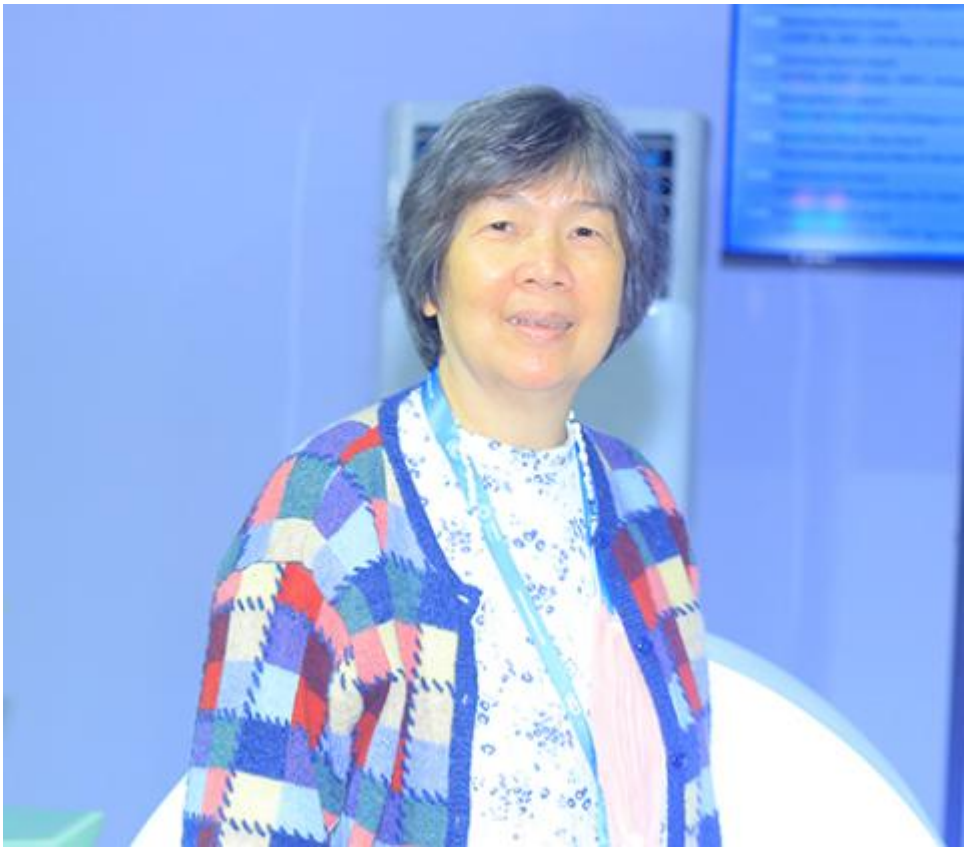
Elsewhere in negotiations, sisters and other female Catholic officials were encouraged by nations aligning their focus on the ways various environmental issues are interrelated, a key concept reflected in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

In 2024, three U.N. environmental conferences stemming from the Rio Conventions established at the 1992 Earth Summit, were scheduled: along with COP29 on climate, the COP16 U.N. biodiversity summit in October and the COP16 desertification conference next month.

That alignment, Catholic officials said, creates significant momentum for action and opportunities for collaboration across various sectors to address interconnected challenges.

"While we eagerly await the outcomes of the climate finance negotiations, it's encouraging to see promising developments already taking shape," said Lisa Sullivan, a senior program officer in the Integral Ecology program for the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

One such development that Sullivan touted as a "significant advancement" is a proposal to address the three Rio Conventions through a new U.N. work program.



Maryknoll Sr. Margaret Lacson is pictured during COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, on Nov. 11-22.

Lacson said that "There is increasing recognition that the three COPs — climate change, biodiversity and desertification — should be considered in relation to one another to create a more holistic approach for addressing the challenges facing our planet."

"What gives me hope at this meeting are the voices and actions of the peoples, organizations and movements who keep trodding on the path toward a healthier planet regardless of decisions made by the officials of the Conference Parties. These have mainly been the Indigenous peoples, faith groups and concerned scientists," Lacson said.

Added Sullivan, "I see the presence of faith groups taking an ever larger role at COP29. We understand better that our mandate to care for God's creation is a mandate to do all we can — from local initiatives to this global negotiating table — to save our common home."

At COP29's faith pavilion, 50 women religious leaders representing eight faiths and 15 countries helped launch the Global Alliance for Women Religious Leaders to Combat Climate Change to mobilize and elevate the influence of female faith leaders on climate issues. Among those who took part were former Irish president Mary Robinson, Sr. Maamalifar Poreku co-executive secretary for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation of the International Union of Superiors General, and Lorna Gold, board president of the Laudato Si' Movement.

In UNANIMA's COP29 statement, it emphasized that religious sisters are champions for the rights of women and girls to access essential climate finance. She urged member states at the U.N. climate summit to seize their unique opportunity to shape global norms, foster cooperation among nations and lead by example through their national policies.

"Empowering women and girls has to be more than just words, and policymakers must push for implementation, alongside development of actionable and coherent policies in areas that are lacking," UNANIMA said.

Quinn, its executive director, added, "We cannot go back at this COP, as time has almost run out."

This story appears in the **COP29 Azerbaijan** feature series. View the full series.