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I am a climate activist and a high school student from Estonia.

I never wished to become an environmental activist. When I learned about the climate crisis and noticed the lack of awareness around it, I could not sit still. So more than two years ago I joined the global Fridays For Future movement. Today I am speaking from my experience as a climate activist and as a member of one of the generations, who have to live all of their lifetime in an environment that humans have not adapted to.

When talking about empowering anyone, for example women, it should be noted that empowerment does not mean having a half of the decision-makers female but continuing to make business-as-usual decisions as a whole. We should not set a target at making people of all genders act like men today and call that empowerment. Instead, we should create structures and systems that allow for differences, are inclusive and enable people to make the best use of their local knowledge. This starts already at the expectations we set.

I suppose that one of the reasons why there are so many girls, but also members of the LGBTQ community in our movement is that we strive to have a non-hierarchical structure and no single decision-makers. These principles have been central to the movement from the beginning and we re-emphasize them frequently. We never had to change our structure from rigid and patriarchal to loose and inclusive, because we never were the former type to begin with. I feel that our unconventional, de-centralized way of organizing ourselves benefits a more diverse spectrum of people than conventional structures usually do. The movement was not initiated by a group of men as powerful things often are – and this is important, because role models do matter. Fridays For Future is a space that people create for themselves to thrive in and become empowered to change the world. If we are to empower women or any other marginalized groups, it is extremely important to allow them to organize in ways that suit them the best. Then it is up to the rest of the world to accept these structures, even if they are unconventional.

But having an unconventional, decentralized structure sometimes creates difficulties when communicating with people and organizations outside the movement. For one, it seems to me that you are taken less seriously when you say that you are speaking as a member of a loose movement rather than as a representative of a clearly structured organization. This nudges people who have organized in unconventional ways to adopt a more traditional structure, and by doing that they risk losing some of the benefits that their original structure gave them. How to take people seriously if they prefer to organize in a loose, unusual way? This is something that the public sector, but also the media, the educational sphere and others should consider.

Empowering women and people of all genders to take environmental action must go hand in hand with empowering men to take environmental action. It might seem counterintuitive.

Usually we think about men, especially white men, as being the most empowered of all groups. But if things really were so, the world would not be in the environmental crises that we are in right now.

Men make up most CEOs, politicians and negotiators at the UN climate conferences. They have the power. But they don't use it to protect the environment.

Women, on the other hand, do more everyday actions to protect the environment than men, such as sort waste, reduce meat consumption or buy second-hand. Studies have shown that taking everyday actions to protect the environment is considered feminine – both by men and women. Adding these two together, it means that there are men in power more often than not and that men tend to be inclined towards not taking environmental action. This seriously hinders environmental action. We need to significantly change the culture.

The first step towards empowering women to protect the environment is to send girls to school. Educated girls marry later, have fewer children and are better able to take care of their families. And as Vanessa Nakate, an Ugandan climate justice activist put it, educated girls grow up to be women leaders. Yet, this solution gets inappropriately little attention when talking about the climate crisis. In the Global North, educating girls goes without saying, but that is evidently not the case everywhere around the world. Wherever in the world girls are educated, their actions positively impact the whole globe.

Thank you.