



## How New York City's Air Pollution Policies Fail Women

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Environmental issues are gender issues, and this includes air pollution. At the most basic level, air pollution can be categorized into indoor and outdoor (ambient) pollution. *Indoor air pollution* often results from outdated **energy systems**, inadequate ventilation (particularly in kitchens and **cooking spaces**), and a variety of contaminants ranging from **chemicals, to dust, to mold**. *Outdoor air pollution* typically **originates** from vehicle emissions, and becomes particularly notable in congested cities. This means residents living near high-traffic roads face unavoidable exposure to pollutants such as carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide.

### The Intersection of Gender and Air Pollution

Although conventional wisdom suggests that air pollution affects everyone equally, examining air pollution through a gendered lens reveals the challenges associated with air quality regulations and highlights the disparities in how it impacts women's health. These imbalances stem from a complex interplay of **biological** and socioeconomic factors. Biologically, women are more susceptible to certain illnesses. For example, women have slower metabolisms which prolongs the amount of time airborne toxins remain in their bodies compared to men – the impacts of which are detrimental. Socioeconomic factors such as gender norms and roles further contribute to women's increased exposure to indoor air pollutants (i.e. from cooking fuels or cleaning agents), and create barriers to accessing healthcare and other preventive resources. **Studies** have also consistently shown that low-income families, especially **those headed by women** and **are from historically marginalized** communities, are disproportionately exposed to more outdoor and indoor pollution. This is because affordable housing is often concentrated in areas with **poor environmental** conditions – a result of systemic housing market **bias**. **Ultimately, poverty** and a lack of resources deepen the inequalities women face in relation to air pollution problems.

Ranking as the most populous city in the **country**, New York City serves as a key case study of these impacts in practice. In New York City, where 52% of the population are women, Black and Latina women are disproportionately affected by both poverty and related health impacts. Around 40% of Black women and 39% of Latina women in NYC are classified as low-income, and among them, over 40% experience significant health challenges. On average, NYC experiences **5,150** air pollution-related hospitalizations each year – 2,000 of which result in death. While the data collected does not specify how many of those hospitalized are women, it does demonstrate how women account for 99% of all breast cancer cases, and are 2.4% more likely than **their male counterparts** to be diagnosed with asthma – both conditions **linked** to areas experiencing elevated levels of pollution. Multiple studies also indicate that **air pollution** negatively impacts reproductive health, contributing to infertility and low birth **rates**.

### Shortfalls of Existing Regulations for Pollution in New York City

Currently, there are a few indoor air pollution policies. Those that are in place, such as New York State's Clean Indoor Air Act (CIAA) and NYC's Smoke-Free Air Act, focus on restricting smoking and vaping in public spaces. Other local laws target **lead**, **asbestos**, **mold**, and impose **fuel-burning** limits. While these measures offer some level of protection, they fail to address the multivariate sources of indoor pollution and the gender-specific health risks they pose.

Moreover, government oversight of air pollution remains inconsistent, with no comprehensive monitoring system in place. While NYC monitors ambient pollution and indoor air quality in public buildings, such regulation does not extend to private residences, leaving occupants without the means to assess or improve their home environments. Additionally, research shows that **low-income** housing, including **NYCHA** buildings, tends to have higher levels of indoor pollution compared to private residences. These regulatory gaps leave vulnerable populations at continued risk.

With respect to outdoor pollution, Governor Hochul's Central Business District Tolling Program, commonly known as the congestion tax, was introduced to curb traffic emissions. However, it faced strong political resistance due to its economic impact on residents, and failed to address emissions from major vehicular sources such as freight trucks, yellow cabs, or MTA transportation.

Implementation and enforcement also remain a significant challenge: while the MTA has **pledged** to transition all buses to zero-emission models, the timeline for such an initiative stretches over 16 years. Furthermore, despite passing anti-idling laws and Clean Air Taxi legislation that mandated **9%** of yellow cabs to be electric or emissions-free, the city's chronic traffic congestion undermines these efforts.

## A More Gender-Equitable Approach to Air Pollution

Compared to many cities across the United States, NYC's air pollution policies are relatively progressive. However, regulatory gaps contribute to the exclusion of women's health from air pollution policy discussions and perpetuate data discrepancies that hinder the development of effective, inclusive solutions. Addressing these shortcomings requires a dedicated governing authority for indoor air quality, stronger legislation supporting zero-emission technologies, and policies that promote alternatives to car dependency and fossil fuel-based transportation.

- 1. Establish a Governing Authority for Air Quality Oversight:** NYC can create a centralized body – akin to an air quality “czar” – to regulate indoor air standards. This authority would hold landlords and employers accountable for maintaining safe air quality, support the transition to cleaner and safer fuel alternatives, provide targeted resources for women and other marginalized communities affected by air pollution, and ensure accurate and inclusive data reporting. This body could also create policies designed to regulate and reduce air pollution, such as mandating emission-free vehicles or encouraging telecommuting for large organizations operating in NYC.
- 2. Enact Transportation Reforms Based on Emission-Free Technology:** NYC can pass legislation modeled after California's *Sustainable Freight Action Plan*, which focuses on zero-emission technology for freight vehicles, government fleets, and taxis. New York State ranks among the top four freight-transporting states, with **90%** of goods being transported by truck, so zero-emission freight policies could significantly reduce pollution. Mandating 100% emissions-free taxis, up from its current 9% requirement, would further cut pollution drastically. Additionally, the MTA could extend its focus on air quality in the **subways**, where the subway's braking equipment is directly linked to underground air

quality, and the LIRR, which uses diesel fuel locomotives.

### **3. Promote Car-Free and Low-Emission Urban Lifestyles**

Municipal policies can encourage more car-free days that prioritize pedestrians, promote public transit, offer free Citi Bike access, and provide public transit discounts. These efforts should be paired with incentives for companies to offer flexible telecommuting options. For example, large organizations could receive tax breaks for providing at least two remote work days per week—a strategy shown to reduce air pollution by 2.6–4.1% in other countries.

### **4. Make Public Transit Safer and More Accessible for Women**

To ensure gender inclusivity, public transportation systems can implement women-centered safety measures. These initiatives could promote flexible drop-off locations within bus routes, increase lighting and surveillance measures, and improve accessibility for caregivers and parents traveling with children.

Pollution affects everyone—but it does not affect everyone equally. Marginalized and low-income women face the greatest risks, yet they remain the least visible in air pollution policy. Building gender-responsive, inclusive policies alongside stronger government oversight can pave the way for a cleaner, healthier, and more equitable future.