

Climate Justice, Gender and Energy



The energy sector encompasses a vast and intricate network of companies engaged in the production and distribution of energy, essential for powering the economy and supporting production and transportation as well as private homes. The burning of fossil fuels is one of the root causes of climate change. Despite their integral role in daily life, it is imperative to phase them out. This briefing provides a short introduction to the interrelationships between gender inequality and energy justice, providing examples of inclusive and sustainable energy projects as well as recommendations.

Energy systems are broadly categorised according to the source of the energy they use: non-renewables (fossil fuels) and renewables. Given the huge impact of fossil-fueled energy on climate change, the decarbonization of existing systems emerges as a pressing issue. Energy systems must transition towards renewable sources, such as wind and solar power. Additionally, there is a critical need to reduce energy consumption in the Global North and ensure a more equitable distribution of access to energy.

In 2015, the EU adopted the Energy Union Strategy aiming to diversify energy sources and to foster cooperation among EU nations, aiming for an internal energy market while embracing the principles of the Paris Agreement to decarbonise the economy (reducing CO₂ emissions). However, despite shared competence in the EU in certain energy policy areas under Article 194 of the TFEU, each Member State retains the right to determine its energy resource exploitation conditions, energy source preferences, and overall energy supply structure. Although the consumption of renewable energy has been growing each year, in 2021, most of the EU's energy came from fossil fuels, particularly natural gas, highlighting the continued slow pace of Europe's green transition.

There is growing evidence that the energy crises disproportionately impact women and girls, including LGBTIQ people. Still "gender and energy" remain an under-researched area. The lack of intersectional and transformative gender mainstreaming in energy policy, regulations and subsidies contributes to exacerbating inequality. Recognising and tackling crucial intersections in the gender-energy relationship to generate climate solutions is of paramount importance. It is not only a matter of promoting energy-efficient technologies, but also of ensuring equity in energy use, and about fundamentally adjusting macroeconomic policies that are currently geared to an unlimited use of energy.

Male Dominance in Energy Decision-Making: From Politics to the Home

The industrial energy production sector at the global level is historically male-dominated, with 76% fewer women engaged in it than men. In the EU, the gender disparity of wages across the energy sector is nearly 20%, and women only occupy up to 20% of senior roles in some energy sub-sectors. Data also shows that women are underrepresented at all levels of political decision-making worldwide, including the European Parliament, which affects their ability to participate in policy-shaping.

In the domestic sphere, gender imbalance in decision-making is also visible in daily life. For example, in Germany, typical investors in domestic renewable energy are male, have a higher income, a higher level of education, strong pro-environmental beliefs and usually live in rural areas. In contrast, women tend to invest less in renewable energy home renovations, not because they're not interested in doing so, but because they fear the expense, as they tend to have limited

Photo by Yating Yang





disposable income and financial savings. This demonstrates the importance of including diverse gender perspectives in both the energy sector and in policy-making, to ensure that women's substantive needs are accounted for.

Gender Roles and Energy Poverty: From Unpaid Labour to Rising Fuel Costs

Energy underlies all economic activities, including unpaid labour, such as caring and housework that still falls mostly on women worldwide. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that women in the EU dedicated 18 hours per week to cooking and housework, compared to 12 hours for men. Women in the Global South spend up to 18 hours per week collecting fuel for cooking. This means that women and girls in the Global South experience precarious health and safety conditions when cooking with toxic and dirty fuels, as they are exposed to indoor air pollution. In addition, they have to walk long distances to collect biomass/firewood which often exposes them to gender-based violence. For women in Europe, spending more time at home implies that they rely more on heating and indoor air quality compared to men. A gender perspective in energy policy and projects is essential to enable healthy opportunities and access to clean energy for all.

Gender roles do not only impact energy use but they also affect access and affordability. The “feminisation” of energy poverty means acknowledging that women and girls are disproportionately affected by living with energy poverty, which is inadequate access to energy in the form of light, heat and cooling. In the EU, gender disparities in income are one of the factors leading to energy poverty inequality. However, the existence and scale of energy poverty is a result of macroeconomic policy choices, in which many European states have privatised energy supply, introducing market mechanisms into cost calculation.

In Europe, lone, female-headed households with lower incomes often experience energy poverty while elderly women are also at greater risk due to their higher life expectancy and lower pensions. During the summer of 2022, it is estimated that the extreme heatwaves in Europe killed more than 61,000 people across Europe, most of them women over 80. This demonstrates that energy poverty is not exclusively an issue for the winter months in Europe but also affects the lives of women during the summer, and thus, policy considerations need to be made on this basis.

Putting Feminist Action at the Centre of Energy Justice

Energy justice has emerged as a response to the need to address social justice issues in energy access, use and policy making. It advocates for a global energy system that fairly disseminates both the benefits and costs of energy services and that has representative and impartial energy decision-making. A feminist approach to energy justice seeks to offer alternative perspectives to neoliberal views on energy solutions, which are still dominant in European policymaking. It advocates for an intersectional and decolonial framework to dismantle multidimensional power structures and address the resulting inequalities, all while transitioning away from fossil fuel consumption.

A feminist, just transition seeks to challenge gendered perceptions of energy, recognising that fossil fuel extraction and consumption often serve as a demonstration of masculinity while also benefiting fossil capitalism. “Petro-masculinity” refers to how masculine values such as toughness, strength, and self-sufficiency can discourage the transition to clean energy because it might be seen as “weak” and “feminine”. As the energy industry is directly related to toxic masculinity, women and non-binary people are marginalised further within it.

Policymaking remains a key avenue for challenging the current system, yet far from adopting a feminist lens, gender-mainstreaming approaches remain limited. The European Green Deal issued in 2020 by the European Commission aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 in the EU. This is despite the fact that one of its core objectives, reducing carbon emissions, largely overlooks gender and other intersectional considerations. Moreover, feminists have called for a shift from gender-blind to gender-transformative policies within the context of transforming the EU's economic system. This requires the reimagining of the European Green Deal as more than a growth strategy focused on increasing gross domestic productivity and instead, prioritising the care of both people and the planet.

Recommendations

- ⇒ The EU and member states should reconsider macroeconomic energy policies, transforming energy as a tradable commodity to energy provision based on energy justice.
- ⇒ The EU and member states should strengthen broader participation to include feminist civil society when developing and implementing energy poverty mitigation strategies.
- ⇒ Energy policies, programmes and projects should include conclusions from intersectional gender impact assessments to identify potential differential impacts on women, men, and gender-diverse individuals. This means collecting much more gender-disaggregated intersectional data.

Spotlight on Women in Agriculture and Sustainable Energy AUSTRIA & MOLDOVA

Engaging women as active contributors to off-grid renewable energy solutions can create opportunities for their leadership and employment, particularly in the agriculture sector. In 2023, the Austrian Development Agency supported 32 women-led agricultural businesses by financing the installation of photovoltaic panels, solar collectors, and biomass boilers. These technologies generate clean and reliable electricity, heat water, and enhance overall energy efficiency. This initiative not only promotes the adoption of renewable energy and energy-efficient technologies but also supports economic sustainability, aligning businesses with environmentally friendly agriculture practices. It is estimated that across the 32 projects, with a total capacity of 518 kW and an average coverage rate of 50% of current energy consumption needs, the generated green energy could result in minimum annual savings of 780,000 Moldovan lei (€40,500). This contributes to an estimated reduction of 152 tons of carbon emissions per year.





Authors: Elena Georgiardi (GenderCC), Emma Rainey (WIDE+)

Editing: Gea Meijers (WIDE+)

Graphic Design: Stephanie Höglund (WIDE+)

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Abbreviations

DG: Directorates-General

EU: European Union

TFEU: Treaty Functioning of the European Union

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About The Project

'Gender and Climate Justice: Knowledge for Empowerment' with the acronym 'COPGendered' is an EU-funded project under the Erasmus+ programme that commenced in December 2022 and will run for three years. The project is led by WIDE+ and a transnational consortium of seven leading partners, including Gender CC, WIDE Austria, GADIP, KULU Women and Development, Mundubat, and CSCD. The primary aim is to equip learners with tools, knowledge, and methodologies to understand and address the critical connections between gender inequality and the climate crisis.

This briefing paper is part of a series of papers that delve into specific themes on the nexus of gender and climate justice. This includes the following briefing papers:

- Gender and Climate Justice
- Climate Justice, Gender and LGBTQI+
- Climate Justice, Gender and Transport
- Gender and Climate-Induced Migration
- Climate Justice, Gender and Extractivism

You can read more about the COPGendered project at: <https://wideplus.org/copgendered-project/>



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