

Gender and energy: reflections from a feminist political ecology perspective

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The chapters in this collection call for and show how to move away from gender-blind approaches to energy by applying and developing a gender analysis to the existing theoretical frameworks used by energy policy researchers. In this brief reflection I respond to three of the chapters which resonated in particular with my feminist political ecology approach. They help to illuminate the challenges facing activist scholars interested in contributing to the creation of just spaces which question the mainstream discourses of green economy and sustainable development in order to address the gender and energy nexus.

The chapters by Ingrid L. Nelson (2020), Gül Özerol and Leila M. Harris (2020); Margaret Matinga and Joy Clancy (2020) focus on understanding gender and energy by scrutinizing how power relations and discursive techniques operate in international development practice and policy. Taken together, they set out how energy transitions need to be viewed critically in order to unpack the gendered affects of developmental and environmental interventions.

In her study of universities, Nelson looks at what she calls 'audit cultures' arguing that we need to scrutinize accounting practices to better understand the impact of our current green techno-politics and its impact on gender and energy. Özerol and Harris explore how insights from literature on water and gender can contribute to unpacking how to approach energy poverty and gender bias through a conscious engendering of energy transitions. Matinga and Clancy look at a case study in rural South Africa in order to provide insights into the gaps in energy scholarship and policy addressing the intersectional issues of gender and health.

In all of the contributions the authors are careful to situate energy in its cultural context showing how what Nelson calls our current neoliberal 'rituals' in scholarship and practice shape energy transitions and their gendered logics and impacts. The authors reveal how energy cannot be understood simply as the provision of better access to resources, more adept technology or efficient management practices.

Instead they ask us to see how gender and energy operates as part of a context-specific socio-natures.

Current energy practices due to gender bias, or over emphasis on technological and economic improvements might not be opening or expanding possibilities but reinforcing and constraining in negative ways sustainability, safety and wellness, for marginal groups, particularly women. The chapters make the case for careful analysis based on long term ethnography in order to better understand the affects and dynamics within households and communities and in daily life in order to determine what kinds of energy are produced and accessed by whom according to whose policy (and profit). These are the kinds of in-depth questions Nelson seeks to address as she scrutinizes the modern university campus in order to identify the practices and discourses within energy analytics that could open up spaces for a diverse and intersectional feminist energy politics that work to benefit not constrain users.

Özerol and Harris (2020) add to this framing of an intersectional feminist energy politics by setting out why an in-depth understanding of gender is key to an understanding of energy in the domain of environmental change and governance. What stands out as key in their discussion for gender and energy nexus is how gender has to be understood as relational and contextual with reference to the processes and relationships that differentially affect people and communities. In addition, they show how gender is intersectional, and needs to be understood alongside, age, class, race, religion and culture in order to address the broader categories of social difference and inequality. They argue, citing a host of scholars, that gender differentiated knowledges are embedded in the existing institutions and politics. It is unpacking that embeddedness that produces analysis that allows for the possibility of a more meaningful participation of affected communities in designing their own energy needs and practices. Crucial to this, like Nelson, they argue it is important to deconstruct neoliberal language and discourses which sees energy as a process based on a science that is gender neutral. Based on lessons from gender analysis of water they argue that gender and energy is complex and nuanced. They underline it is important for successful and sustainable policy to look at the social and emotional aspects rather than frame everything from an economic perspective.

For example, instead of promoting women as entrepreneurs and operating on the assumption that better energy access 'saves time', good studies and policy on gender and energy need to take into account the social, economic and institutional barriers and burdens that can make women vulnerable rather than empowered.

Matinga and Clancy along with Özerol and Harris argue for both qualitative and quantitative methodologies that allow an intersectional understanding of energy use that takes into account the experiences and emotions of the users as well as the implicit gender bias often built into management and governance practices. Matinga and Clancy bring these insights into play in their case study from South Africa looking at gender, firewood and health. Their study shows the complex social issues at play in rural areas in South Africa in relation to the continued use of fuel wood. In order to understand how better to formulate energy policy solutions that consider not only gender but also health, their ethnographic approach brings out what can be learned from the village women. Listening over time to the women of all ages they pinpointed how chronic ill health and stress is part of the hidden cascading health impacts which are, alarmingly, perceived by the women as normal. Their qualitative study picks up the significant energy-health and gender linkages that could not be captured in statistics as women fail to report these health issues in surveys as they think the myriad of health issues they endure is just part of their everyday norm. By observing daily life and through in-depth interviews, Matinga and Clancy show how the relationship between energy access and gender informed almost every aspect of life: age, health, religion, personal relationships including marriage and wellbeing.

These three engaging and informative chapters show how feminist analysis, including scrutiny of audits, management and governance policy and ethnography provides a new understanding of energy unpacking hidden gendered realities. Their analysis encourages energy policy experts working towards the SDG 7 to consider how to respond more appropriately and sensitively to on-ground realities. Each of these chapters help to bring out theoretical, methodological and practical insights that can help to engender the energy transition beyond the neoliberal discourse, bringing to the fore the gendered social and emotional aspects of access to natural resources and participation.

Chapters referred to in the reflections:

Özerol, G. and L.M. Harris (2020) Gender-sensitive approaches to analysing water governance: Insights and lessons for engendering the energy transition

Matinga M. and J. Clancy (2020) Gender, energy and health

Nelson. Ingrid L. (2020) On the Possibilities and Politics of Feminist Energy Analytics