



# The Agrarian-Mining nexus and Energy Sovereignty

## GRASSROOTS WOMEN AND ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY

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Energy sovereignty is a political ideology which seeks to liberate communities, people and groups from the dominant fossil fuels driven energy system that is driven by the needs of capital as opposed to the needs of the people. However, the existing localised renewable energy alternatives, whilst addressing the climate change concerns and leaning towards the participation and democratisation of the energy systems, have often failed to take into consideration the needs of the peasant, working-class and indigenous women, who carry the burden of energy poverty and climate induced disasters. As a response to the absence of gender justice in the energy sovereignty debates, this essay is proposing some principles that should be taken into consideration when laying the foundations for women-driven energy transitions that seek to transform the energy sector.

### CONCEPTUALISATION OF ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY

The notion of energy sovereignty began as a conception that seeks to rethink and reshape the priorities concerning energy systems decision making<sup>1</sup>. It is Based on the need to shift away from advancing 'energy security' which is based on a narrow conceptualisation of how energy poverty can be addressed. 'Energy security' does not address the issues of the sources of energy supply and how the energy is produced. Therefore, by failing to centre the creation of renewable energy as an energy source, 'energy security' gives room to accommodate carbon-intensive energy sources. By contrast, energy sovereignty is centred on the geopolitics of the past climate crises and how energy systems need to be driven by clean, renewable energy systems that are controlled and owned by the communities. Therefore, the priority of energy sovereignty is the decarbonisation of the energy systems. It places importance on systems that are climate just, and puts the rights of peoples and individuals to have the chance to make their own decisions concerning the forms, the sources as well as the scales, patterning and organisation of energy systems. Energy sovereignty is embedded in climate justice and environmental justice politics. Energy sovereignty is the politics of the people. However, energy sovereignty, without gender justice, does not guarantee the same energy sovereignty to women.

### ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY AND GENDER JUSTICE

Energy sovereignty refers to the right of individuals, communities and peoples to decide their energy source, production, distribution and consumption in a way that they consider ecological-





ly, socially, economically and culturally appropriate, so long as it does not negatively affect other groups in society.<sup>2</sup> This definition leaves out gender as an analytical category and subsumes women under ‘individuals, communities and peoples’. When the façade of gender neutrality is not challenged, and when there is no opportunity to trouble and disrupt the boundaries to offer a chance to examine and address this gender blindness, then community energy sovereignty will not translate to women’s energy sovereignty. When energy sovereignty is guided by gender justice, it should emancipate women from energy poverty and facilitate their meaningful participation in the energy systems. The inclusion of prevailing social and cultural norms into the design of energy systems poses a threat to women’s participation in the energy generation, distribution and consumption practices because of the entrenchment of patriarchal values and beliefs within social and cultural structures. Community-driven energy systems should be sensitive to the multiple forms of oppression that marginalise peasant, working-class and indigenous women, and women in general. Women’s oppression is organised through institutions like the family, community, market, religious bodies, schools, government, and others. These institutions’, norms, customs, and traditions create and justify the oppression on an ongoing basis.

It is apparent that women often occupy the frontlines of environmental justice and energy justice movements because they experience climate change more severely than other groups in society. This is despite their exclusion from formal channels of participation in local energy systems. Women are disproportionately impacted by the impacts of climate change because of their unpaid household burden and care-work and this is even more severe on the women whose lives and wellbeing depend on the land for food production and survival. This is the reason why Feminist movements are calling for gender justice in energy transition debates. Energy sovereignty should guarantee women’s human rights, autonomy and self-determination. Whilst access to energy is critical, energy systems should not be designed in a way that violates the rights of women and other vulnerable groups in society. When energy systems are profit-oriented and profit-driven and developed by large corporations, they become more concerned about growth and give no room for the participation and inclusion of peasant, working-class and indigenous women, as they perpetuate structures that benefit their corporate interests.

## RENEWABLE ENERGY COOPERATIVES

When energy sovereignty centres on gender justice, it considers women and other minority groups as the most relevant sources of knowledge that aims at transforming their conditions and, therefore, should inform energy transitions and be the drivers of energy systems. Statistically, grassroots women are more apprehensive about climate change, as organisers, educators and caregivers who have throughout history devised ways to provide and meet their family needs.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this places them in a strategic position to innovate and develop sustainable energy alternatives informed by values of equity and the building of local power. The growth of renewable energy cooperatives in some communities worldwide has proved that equity is not an automatic and easy process as women continued to be marginalised and excluded in energy decision-making processes, even at the community level. Even though the cooperatives are intended to ensure energy sovereignty at the community level, the same cooperatives do not consider women’s specific and strategic needs. Therefore, they fail to guarantee women’s energy sovereignty. Engaging women as workers, volunteers and consumers within the renewable energy cooperatives without putting them in roles where they can make decisions and drive the change does not assure energy sovereignty for women.



## PRINCIPLES FOR WOMEN'S ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY

For the peasant, working-class and indigenous women to realise energy sovereignty, there are some steps that they need to take. These include organising to resist the power that the fossil fuels corporations are holding in the energy sector, reclaiming the energy sector and taking control of the energy systems so that women have control of the distribution of risks and benefits, and restructuring the energy sector to give priority to gender equity and gender justice within the renewable energy cooperatives so that the system allows for just community ownership and distribution of the governance. When energy is produced for profit and not for the people, it exacerbates inequalities and disparities within the energy system. Therefore, the road to women's energy sovereignty should involve organising to challenge the profit-driven energy production and the patriarchal nature of the system to ensure that women have control over the system.

Apart from gender justice, one of the principles that should inform women's energy sovereignty is energy democracy. This emerging social movement aims to push for renewable energy transitions by resisting the dominant energy agenda by claiming back and ensuring the democratic restructuring of energy regimes.<sup>4</sup> There is need for an appreciation of the existence of a dominant, corporate-driven renewable energy plan that does not take into consideration the needs and aspirations of the local communities, particularly women who are often at the receiving end of mega renewable energy systems that remain controlled by corporations and continue to marginalise women's needs. Therefore, this democracy weaved within the energy systems should allow women's full participation. Ensuring energy democracy by allowing women to determine, drive, and decide on the renewable energy system creates the much-needed chance to destabilise the patriarchal, capitalist power relations that continue to exist within the existing systems and reverse women's stories of deprivation relegation and subjugation.

Continued energy poverty compromises people's health, reduces their livelihoods opportunities, and women's ability to rise out of poverty. Women are often viewed as energy users only and continue to be marginalised in the decision-making process related to energy services, yet they experience energy poverty much more severely than men. There is thus a need to build women's leadership in the energy transition spaces. There is a need for the redistribution of power in a way that guarantees the full participation of the local women as they transition to the equitable, resilient, sustainable, local, community-controlled renewable energy systems. The current energy systems, including the renewable energy cooperatives and the localised renewable energy systems, are dominated by systems of control and power that privileges men. The designs tend to be hierarchical and patriarchal, therefore the need to restructure to allow for collective women-centred leadership of the energy systems.

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