

Gender and Energy: a Northern Perspective¹

Joy Clancy

This article arises out of a study in which I am involved, assessing from a gender perspective the energy component of the European Commission's

Fifth Framework Research programme

(see ENERGIA News 3.3).

The study attempts to identify whether, in the North, there are gender differences in what women are doing as academics, as activists and as workers in the energy sector. Do they face different problems to men in terms of their career development? What do women in the North think about energy? Are their lives affected differently to men's in terms of energy choice, and does this then impact on their health? Some of the findings are reported here.

I hope that readers in the South will find this article of interest. Women in the energy sector in the South and the North can provide mutual support, as for example was seen between the Canadian and Pakistani Oil and Gas Sectors (ENERGIA News 2.3). Women in Pakistan benefited from the support given by Canadian women in developing strategies for overcoming obstacles to their career development. Participation in this project made Canadian women aware of how few women there were in the sector in Canada and they began to question what lay behind this.

Women and Energy Poverty in the North

There is little published information about how energy impacts on the lives of women in the North. Decision makers in the energy sector are unaware of the need to consider gender. For example, a recent detailed household energy survey in New Zealand, which set out to identify the technical and behavioural factors that determine energy use, did not disaggregate household members by gender. However, demographic evidence would suggest that this should not be ignored. In the North, there are more women than men living below the poverty line, for example, in the USA, 15.4% of women and 12% of men live below the poverty line². Poor women are disproportionately found as heads of households, either in single parent families or, due to their greater longevity than men, living alone at pensionable age.

How does poverty impact on energy choices? Northern climates create the need for space heating and/or cooling for significant parts of the year. Young children and older people have special heating requirements to reduce their vulnerability to illness. In the UK, spending more than 20% of household income on fuel is defined as "living in fuel poverty". In 1991, seven million households (36% of the total) in the UK came within this category. Heating and cooking for poor people can be problematic if they have a restricted choice of energy forms: electricity is expensive; and solid fuel produces smoke which has negative health impacts. Poor people often live in housing with poor insulation and frequently use second-hand equipment with poor energy efficiency. Poor people often have to pay

for their electricity and gas using pre-payment systems at higher unit costs than those available to households with monthly billing systems. All these factors contribute to the high energy costs of poor people. From this brief analysis and the demographics mentioned above, we can reasonably conclude that there are more women than men living in energy poverty in the North. *This may, in some cases, have the unfortunate consequence that poor women, relative to their incomes, actually contribute to global warming disproportionately more than higher income groups.*

We should also not forget that some areas of the North such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Chechnya are presently war-torn or recovering from strife. These areas often have severe winters with a high fuel demand for heating and cooking (Stillman, 2000). Women have to search for fuel and are exposed to the sorts of dangers not unfamiliar to women in the South.

Northern Women's Energy Choices

There is no doubt that there are many women in the North active in renewable energy, either running co-operatives (for example, the Windfang women's wind energy cooperative in Germany - reported in ENERGIA News 3.1) or in the political arena (for example, the New Zealand MP Janette Fitzsimmons is a prominent energy activist and the Co-leader of the Green Party). However, the majority of respondents in a sample survey of European female and male energy professionals considered that there were no differences between men and women in their priorities for energy research. Those who did see differences considered women to be interested in "soft" energies and men in "hard" energies.

Barbara Farhar and her colleagues at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) in the USA are among the few researchers to have conducted any sort of systematic enquiry into gender differences in energy in the North. A nationwide survey, conducted between 1973 and 1979, showed little discernable gender difference in energy preferences, although women had a slightly stronger preference for energy conservation and a slightly greater antipathy towards nuclear power. More recent data exist but have not, unfortunately, been published. Gender disaggregated data would provide us with a more comprehensive picture of the way women and men in the North view energy policy options. This could be done relatively easily within Europe since the European Commission surveys European citizens at two-year intervals on their attitudes to a key range of policy issues including energy. At present, the data is not published on a gender-disaggregated basis. A simple adjustment could provide us with a wealth of information.

Women have been leading activists in the anti-nuclear movement. For example, the Plutonium Free Future Women's Network (Rainbow Serpent), based in Japan, has campaigned to promote its demand that governments shift their investments and subsidies away from nuclear and fossil fuels, towards safe, renewable energy systems and has published the "Women's Handbook on Safe Energy". However, women are not a homogenous group and it should be of no surprise to find groups of pro-nuclear women. There is a very active network of women working in the nuclear industry (WIN) who lobby vigorously for non-military uses of nuclear energy.

Women working in the energy sector

There is a small but growing band of women working in the energy sector. However, the sector suffers from the perception that it offers a professional career dominated by male technocrats in their

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1. This article is based on a paper entitled "Gender and Energy – Women's concerns in Energy: Background and State of the Art" to be published later in 2001 by the Research Directorate of the European Communities.

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fifties. Currently in Australia, women make up 20% of the workforce in the Electricity, Gas and Water sector but fill less than 5% of the technical posts. These statistics are representative of other Northern countries.

Women's skills can be complementary to men's, leading to a more balanced and efficient organisation. Recent initiatives to recruit more women include the ENEQO project within the European electricity industry, which aims to advance equal opportunities by promoting the positive benefits that employing women brings to the working environment.

Due to their small number, women working in the energy sector can feel a sense of isolation. Sometimes this leads them to abandoning their careers; sometimes they leave to set up businesses with other women (as in the Windfang example referred to above). Networking can play an important part in supporting women in their work. There are a small number of national networks, for example, in Colorado USA, a group of women energy professionals have formed a "Women in Energy Group" (Helen Reddy Kilowatt), and in Germany, there is "Energiefrauen" (Women in Energy), a national informal network of more than 150 women students and professionals.

Should more attention be given to women and energy in the North?

ENERGIA in the past has not really addressed the issues of women and energy in the North, although a number of its support group members have advocated that it should. The EC's study is not an isolated activity in this area, the German Federal Ministry for the Environment has, for example, commissioned a paper on Gender and Energy in the North as part of its preparations for CSD9 (see elsewhere in this issue). It therefore seems an appropriate moment to ask what **ENERGIA News** readers think about this. If you think **ENERGIA** should do more, what type of support do you think is needed? How could this be funded? Do readers in the South find

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Thus the expected impact on women might be relatively small, as long as they retain their agricultural land and their labour is not diverted to forestry.

Forest projects are expected to be the dominant LULUCF project type under CDM. However, since LULUCF projects will be set up by private investors, who will later sell the "carbon credits" earned, it is unlikely that such projects will be small scale involving local farmers. International large-scale enterprises will tend to invest in large-scale, industrial schemes. Women, being predominantly small-scale entrepreneurs, are unlikely to benefit by becoming owners of sinks if the situation is left to market forces.

The IPCC 2000 Special Report on LULUCF reviews the experiences with 27 carbon sink projects in 19 countries. They include soil enhancement projects in Canada, tropical and temperate forest rehabilitation and conservation in Belize and the Czech Republic, and agroforestry projects in Guatemala and Mexico. The creation or strengthening of local economies, and improvements for women, are explicitly mentioned in only one project (Scole Fe Pilot Project for Community Forestry and Carbon Sequestration, Oriapas, Mexico, IPCC 2000).

In conclusion, LULUCF projects in developing countries have the potential to influence gender equity. These projects provide development opportunities as well as risks for poor and small-scale farmers, and for women in particular. When deliberating on the role of LULUCF as a mitigation option, this should be taken into consideration. ■

articles on women in the North useful? **ENERGIA** would welcome your views. ■

References

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- "Gender Perspectives On Energy For CSD9" a position paper prepared by the **ENERGIA** Support Group and NGO Women's Caucus



◆ Joy Clancy is a Senior Lecturer with the Technology and Development Group of the University of Twente in the Netherlands, where she teaches Development Studies, specialising in Technology Transfer. She is interested in gender, energy, poverty, and sustainable livelihoods (in particular how they relate to small scale and informal sector industries) in the South.

Looking at gender and energy in a Northern context is a complete departure from her usual research field. Joy is also **ENERGIA** Director for Regionalisation and Capacity Building.

◆ For more information on the article, please contact:
**Joy Clancy, Technology and Development Group (TDG),
 University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede,
 The Netherlands; Tel: +31.(0)53.4893537/3545,
 Fax: +31.(0)53.4893087; Email: J.S.Clancy@tdg.utwente.nl**

2. Poverty is a relative state. Many in the South would not consider women classified as "poor" by Northern standards as living in poverty. In terms of their material possessions, this might well be true. However, in terms of having opportunities and the ability to make choices which impact on their, and their families', health and creativity, poor women in the North also face barriers due to their low income relative to others in their society. It is important to remember that poverty in the North also has a race dimension. For example, in the USA, African-Americans make up approximately 12% of the population but form 28% of the poor. Poverty in the North means people are not afforded the dignity and respect of wealthier members of society.

References

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◆ Jens Mackensen works at UNEP Nairobi as the Programme Officer for Land Use Management and Soil Conservation. His work includes participation in the on-going international LULUCF discussions. Prior to joining UNEP, Jens worked as a scientific project leader on forestry, land use and soil biogeochemistry projects in Brazil, Costa Rica and Indonesia. He has also gained experience as a freelance consultant for German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the Australian Greenhouse Office. Jens holds a PhD. in forestry from the University of Göttingen, Germany.

◆ For more information on the article, please contact:
**Jens Mackensen, PhD. Programme Officer, UNEP Division of Environmental Policy Development and Law, P.O.Box 30552,
 Nairobi, Kenya; Tel: +254.(0)2.623283/4251,
 Fax: +254.(0)2 62.4324/3861,
 Email: Jens.Mackensen@unep.org**