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Feminist Dimensions of Clean Cooking & Energy Justice

Clean Cooking, Gender & Climate

Clean cooking is a critical issue that sits at the intersection of energy access and affordability, climate action, public health, and gender equality. Though debates on language remain, ‘clean cooking’ refers to a range of technologies and fuels that allow people to cook food safely and efficiently, without many harmful associated emissions and pollutants.¹ Lack of access to clean cooking methods, and the related indoor air pollution, is a challenge facing more than 2 billion people globally, and there are devastating—often deadly—health impacts that disproportionately affect women and children.² In addition to the crisis of health this creates, the care and domestic work of fuel collection, as well as cooking and cleaning labor that often falls on women, girls, and gender-diverse people, can further entrench labor and economic inequalities.

Historically, clean cooking has not been a top priority within global energy and climate discussions. Feminist energy and climate advocates have worked for decades to bring it into focus in international policy spaces. Clean cooking should be understood within the broader political economy of energy extraction, care and climate debt, where women in the Global South continue to subsidize the energy systems of the wealthy through unpaid labour and unsafe fuels. In recent years, attention and investment have increased significantly. In 2023, the Clean Cooking Alliance reported USD \$218 million in capital investment in the sector (a fivefold increase from five years prior), though much of this was driven by debt financing and not grants.³ In 2024, at the first ever high-level Summit on Clean Cooking in Africa, 60 countries and

¹Graphic: Differences in clean cooking technologies – a vision for clean cooking access for all – analysis - IEA. International Energy Agency. (n.d.).

<https://www.iea.org/reports/a-vision-for-clean-cooking-access-for-all/graphic-differences-in-clean-cooking-technologies>

²Executive summary – a vision for clean cooking access for all – analysis - IEA. International Energy Agency. (n.d.-a).

<https://www.iea.org/reports/a-vision-for-clean-cooking-access-for-all/executive-summary>

³New report: Clean cooking sector reaches inflection point amid record growth and rising carbon revenues. Clean Cooking Alliance. (2025, July 29). <https://cleancooking.org/news/new-report-clean-cooking-sector-reaches-inflection-point-amid-record-growth-and-rising-carbon-revenues/>

private sector partners pledged over USD \$2.2 billion toward clean cooking.⁴ While this demonstrates growing awareness, in the grand scheme of energy and climate action, clean cooking receives just 1% of international energy finance⁵, and is still often sidelined as only a “gender issue.”

Feminists demand greater, debt-free resourcing and action towards this critical climate, energy and gender issue, and note that this resourcing occurs within a capitalist framework that does not centre women or serve their needs. Feminists offer critical considerations for a path forward, calling for an intersectional, rights-centered and feminist approach with the following dimensions. Our vision of clean cooking envisions energy systems that nourish life rather than exploit it, where the labour, knowledge and leadership of women and gender-diverse people is recognised as central to climate justice, not peripheral to it.

FEMINIST DIMENSIONS OF CLEAN COOKING

1. Prioritize rights over profits

Feminists advocate that any clean cooking approaches must prioritize rights-based approaches over profit-driven approaches. Multinational corporations, many headquartered in the Global North, dominate investment and production processes, but must not drive decision-making around implementation and policy. Investments should focus on public finance, prioritizing grant-based financing and local ownership, rather than allowing the market to determine who and where clean cooking stoves and accompanying infrastructure should be provided or placed. Clean cooking cannot reproduce the same extractive logic that has historically dispossessed communities in the Global Majority of land and agency under the guise of development.

⁴Landmark summit mobilises \$2.2 billion to make 2024 a turning point for clean cooking access in Africa - News - IEA. (n.d.). <https://www.iea.org/news/landmark-summit-mobilises-2-2-billion-to-make-2024-a-turning-point-for-clean-cooking-access-in-africa>

⁵Executive summary – a vision for clean cooking access for all – analysis - IEA. International Energy Agency. (n.d.-a). <https://www.iea.org/reports/a-vision-for-clean-cooking-access-for-all/executive-summary>

2. Women are change-makers, not just consumers

Women and gender-diverse people are leaders and decision-makers in addressing challenges around clean cooking, not just recipients of technology. Women-led small businesses, microenterprises, and community-centered groups have led context-specific clean cooking implementation processes, and have valuable insights that should be lessons and best practices for development practitioners. Domination of multinational corporations in the sector can squeeze out these actors, driving them out of business and reducing women to recipients and consumers rather than active decision-makers, innovators and implementers. Access to finance, technical support, erosion of intellectual property barriers, and enabling national policy conditions are important tools to ensure local women leaders in the sector thrive. Policies must also be intersectional in recognizing how barriers compound: for example, elite and urban women are more likely to access finance easily while rural, displaced or Indigenous women are more likely excluded.

3. People, not markets, should determine technology choices

Clean cooking tools and technologies vary widely in fuel type, design, and methodology, but the uniform approach prescribed by corporate models and international organizations can fail to meet context-specific needs. Communities who will actually use them—including women and gender-diverse people—must have decision making power around which technologies are appropriate, sustainable and useful for them, and that will work to decentralize and democratize energy access. Additionally, feminists take issue with the growing popularity of integrating clean cooking into carbon market schemes, as carbon credits and markets are false solutions that further colonial, profit-driven approaches and commodify energy poverty. True technological sovereignty requires community-based innovation and decision-making, open source design, and public financing mechanisms that are free from carbon credit dependency.

4. Recognize and value care work

Cooking, including the ability to do so with clean cooking technologies, is care work—labor which is predominantly carried out by women and gender-diverse people, and is usually unpaid, undervalued and invisibilized by traditional labor and policy frameworks. A just energy transition must recognize that access to healthy, safe, low-emission cooking technologies is an imperative, but cannot be the endpoint of action. Universal access to clean cooking must be a part of a broader interrogation of the social and political forces that leave women and girls with disproportionate amounts of domestic and care work, including cooking, and consider how labor, economic and climate policies can better recognize and remedy these inequalities. Recognizing care work means that the time savings from clean cooking and greater energy access can translate to rest, political participation, or a range of other possibilities, not just new unpaid labor for women and gender-diverse people.

5. Clean cooking cannot be the gender ‘checkbox’ action

Governments cannot treat commitments towards clean cooking as the sole indicator of gender progress in climate action, or a “checkbox” on women’s rights to tick. Enacting clean cooking investments or policies—while a welcome step—does not in and of itself make a government a champion on gender. Substantive and ambitious action on gender and climate requires systemic public investment across sectors, including labor, care, energy, health, and adaptation. Even within the energy sector specifically, meaningful gender action from governments must include deep consideration of gendered barriers to access, affordability, decision-making power, and alleviating care work burdens—not just a commitment to increasing clean cooking technologies for women. Within clean cooking and energy access programming broadly, governments and donors should create and monitor feminist accountability indicators that go beyond technological distribution, tracking power shifts, changes in ownership, and the reduction in unpaid care burdens of women and gender-diverse people.

While awareness and investments from governments on clean cooking are growing, integrating feminist dimensions is important to advance a

rights-based vision of clean cooking as a critical area of action for gender-just energy transitions globally.

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