



## Decolonizing Power: Integrating Gender Justice in Sustainable Energy Frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa

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### Article Information:

**Article Type:**

Research Article

**Manuscript Received:**

1 June 2024

**Final Revision Received:**

14 November 2024

**Accepted:**

20 November 2024

**Published Online:**

15 February 2025

**Keywords** Decolonization, gender disparities, energy, policies, sustainability.

Sub-Saharan Africa ranks high on the list of regions with the highest levels of gender inequality, performing poorly in gender balance in crucial indices, including educational attainment, healthcare, political empowerment, and economic participation. This level of gender inequality is also evident in the region's energy governance, such that women across the continent are disproportionately represented in careers and leadership positions in the energy sectors of their respective countries, less knowledgeable and involved in household, community, and national energy decisions, and disproportionately burdened by energy-related domestic chores. Consequently, women lack equitable access to energy resources, have little or no influence over energy policies, and their needs are not considered in crucial decisions related to energy access, affordability, and sustainability. This article explores the causes, effects, and potential ways of reducing these gender disparities. This is achieved by exploring the power structures responsible for the disparities from the perspective of various feminist theories, including the feminist theory, the matrix of domination framework, and the black feminist thought theory, and frameworks. Policy changes to address the pervasive gender disparities in the energy sector are proposed and potential problems that may arise in efforts to mainstream gender in energy policies highlighted.

**Cite this article:** Adenike A. Akinsemolu (2025). Decolonizing Power: Integrating Gender Justice in Sustainable Energy Frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Journal of Sustainable Development, Law and Policy. Vol. 16:2. 36-52. DOI: 10.4314/jsdlp.v16i2.3



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**Publisher:** Institute for Oil, Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development (OGEEES Institute), Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The primary sources of energy globally are a combination of traditional sources of energy such as oil, coal, gas, and hydroelectric power, whose adoption is growing rapidly as part of global efforts to reduce reliance on non-renewable energy<sup>1</sup>. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), coal, natural gas, and oil contribute about 80% of electricity, with renewable sources of energy such as hydroelectric power, solar energy, biofuels, and tidal waves accounting for the remaining energy used across the continent<sup>2</sup>. While the capacity to produce energy from these sources is well developed in some parts of Africa, other parts lag behind, with some lacking access to electricity entirely<sup>3</sup>. Currently, a large proportion of the continent's population lacks a reliable electricity supply as well as access to modern and reliable cooking fuels<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, firewood and charcoal are used widely as sources of energy particularly in rural areas<sup>5</sup>. These problems with energy access, affordability, and consistency in SSA are not unique to the region since an estimated 10% of the world's population lacks access to electricity. However, 70% of these people live in Africa, with the majority living in rural areas and only 47% having access to electricity and modern sources of energy overall<sup>6</sup>. The resulting extensive energy poverty in the continent is attributed to poor technology, limited capacity building relative to energy, unsustainable energy policies, economic instability, and lack of financial support and investment in the energy sector<sup>7</sup>. To address these challenges, countries in SSA are adopting and strengthening policies to improve energy access, affordability, and sustainability through the adoption of sustainable and renewable energy sources, extension of electricity coverage to rural areas, and the incentivization of private investment in the energy sector<sup>8</sup>.

A comprehensive analysis of the state of energy in SSA necessitates the evaluation of energy access, affordability, and policy from various perspectives. One crucial perspective from which energy should be explored is gender justice. This article

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<sup>1</sup> Ritchie, Hannah and Rosado, Pablo, 'Energy Mix' (Our World in Data, January 2024) <https://ourworldindata.org/energy-mix> accessed 14 May 2024

<sup>2</sup> Agoundemba Maklewa, Kim Chang and Kim Hyun-Goo, 'Energy Status in Africa: Challenges, Progress and Sustainable Pathways' (2023) *Energy* 16, 23

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Baker Lucy, 'New frontiers of electricity capital: energy access in sub-Saharan Africa' (2022) *New Political Economy* 2

<sup>7</sup> Hafner Manfred, Tagliapietra Simone and de Strasser Lucia, 'The Challenge of Energy Access in Africa' (2018) Springer Briefs in Energy

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

explores the integration of gender justice in sustainable energy frameworks using select countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to demonstrate the prevalence of gender inequalities in energy justice, identify its causes, and highlight the measures taken by the highlighted countries to address the challenges to which energy poverty and its disproportionate impact on women are attributed to provide a pathway for other countries across SSA to follow suit. This article is divided into ten sections. In the second section, we explore the elements of gender justice as they relate to energy access, affordability, and participation in the decisions that shape energy policies. The third section introduces the origin and impacts of the colonial occupation of various countries in SSA on energy policies. In the fourth section, we explore the observed gendered access to energy in select countries in SSA to demonstrate the need for gender justice in issues related to energy, including access, affordability, decision-making, and overall participation in energy policy. The fifth section explores some theories and frameworks that help explain the prevalence of gender injustices relative to energy. In the sixth section, we evaluate and critique policies in various countries in SSA, with specific emphasis on their gender inclusion, or lack thereof. In the seventh section, we propose policy reforms to the limitations and gaps identified in the previous section, before presenting some case studies of both successful and limited integration of gender justice with energy justice in select countries in SSA in the eighth section. Finally, in the ninth section, we anticipate potential challenges and barriers to the implementation of the proposed policy reforms before concluding the review by sharing our final thoughts on the future of energy policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, emphasizing sustainable and equitable development.

## **2. KEY ELEMENTS OF GENDER JUSTICE**

Gender justice refers to the complete realization of equal rights of all genders, free and fair distribution and availability of opportunities for everyone regardless of their gender, and recognition of total equality between all genders<sup>9</sup>. The concept is founded upon achieving universal recognition of women as self-sufficient, autonomous, and rights-bearing members of society by their own right<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, gender justice is a concept that seeks to redistribute power, opportunities, and rights to all genders equally. In the context of SSA, gender justice is threatened by harmful practices such as gender-based violence and early marriage of girls, gender gaps in access to education, financial services, and economic opportunities, and social norms that place disproportionate burdens of

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<sup>9</sup> M Nadkarni, *Ethics of Our Times: Essays in Gandhian Perspective* (Oxford University Press 2014)

<sup>10</sup> Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2021) 266-276

care, domestic duties, and community participation on women<sup>11</sup>. Efforts to achieve gender justice in the region target these factors, aiming to establish equal rights and opportunities for all genders. These efforts translate differently to various sectors of the economy in SSA. Relative to the establishment of sustainable energy networks in SSA, for instance, gender justice encompasses universal access, affordability, and participation in energy decisions by both genders. This could take the form of the consideration of the needs of all genders in energy decisions, fair prioritization of energy access policies, and involvement of all genders in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of energy policies. Some of the energy policies discussed in relation to gender justice in the context of this article include urban and rural electrification policies across SSA, renewable energy policies, gender inclusion policies in the energy sector, and policies that govern the distribution of resources to support entrepreneurs in the energy sector. This evaluation of energy sustainability in SSA requires the decolonization of the factors that influence gender justice, including cultural, social, economic, and political power dynamics in SSA as they relate to energy. In its most basic sense, decolonization refers to the end of the rule of a foreign power and the restoration of the independence of the formerly colonized nation or entity<sup>12</sup>. This transfer of power typically involves addressing colonial pillars such as racism, sexism, the perceived supremacy of one group over others, and capitalism and the institution of reforms to resolve power imbalances and their effects<sup>13</sup>. Since the perceived supremacy of men over women is the cause of gender inequality in energy justice in SSA, decolonization is necessary for the integration of gender justice into the energy decisions and policies driving the current energy transition. SSA, and the rest of the world, are currently pursuing an energy transition aiming to shift the global energy sector from unsustainable sources of energy, particularly oil, to sustainable energy. Ultimately, it is crucial for the region to integrate gender justice into its efforts to address the current challenges of energy access, affordability, and sustainability and its strategies to transition to renewable sources of energy.

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa Kolovich and Monique Newiak, *Gender Equality and Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (International Monetary Fund 2024)

<sup>12</sup> Gopal Priyamvada, 'On Decolonisation and the University' (2021) *Textual Practice* 35

<sup>13</sup> Chaudhuri Monica and others, 'Decolonising global health: beyond 'reformative' roadmaps and towards decolonial thought' (2021) *BMJ Global Health* 6, 7

### **3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT TO THE INFLUENCE OF COLONIALISM ON ENERGY POLICIES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

Energy policies across SSA reflect the policies established during the colonial occupation of most of the continent's countries by European imperial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before colonialism, Africa relied mainly on renewable sources such as wood and biomass for all its usable energy<sup>14</sup>. The colonial powers carried over their knowledge to their colonies, leading to the adoption of fossil fuels as a source of energy and later, the production and distribution of electricity in individual African countries to power industries, businesses, and households. Colonial influence in energy policies in SSA is evident in policies such as the current reliance of the continent on fossil fuels, natural gas, and coal, and the prioritization of electrification over energy projects that meet the needs of individual households or communities.

### **4. GENDER DISPARITIES IN ENERGY ACCESS**

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), SSA has the highest rate of gender inequality<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, compared to men, women across SSA have limited access to education, healthcare, income-earning opportunities, and justice, which limits or shuts them out of enjoying basic rights such as the right to own property, which ultimately influences participation in decisions related to energy<sup>16</sup>. One other essential service and sector in which significant gender disparities are inherent across SSA is energy. Women in SSA bear a significantly larger brunt of the pervasive energy insecurity in SSA compared to their male counterparts. For instance, a survey conducted among South African households showed that male-headed households were less vulnerable to energy poverty and had a higher adaptive capacity to meet their energy needs compared to female-led households, which were highly vulnerable to energy poverty<sup>17</sup>. Among these households, energy poverty manifested through insufficient monetary resources to meet their households' energy needs, forcing women in both male-led and female-led households to spend more time seeking alternative sources of

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<sup>14</sup> Cropper John, 'Running on Empty: Fossil Fuels, Local Fuels, and Entangled Infrastructures in Colonial Senegal, 1885–1945' (2022) *The Journal of African History*

<sup>15</sup> Dalia Hakura and others, 'IMF Working Paper' (IMF, June 2016) <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16111.pdf> accessed 14 May 2024

<sup>16</sup> Conrad Murendo and Gamuchirai Murenje, 'Decomposing gender inequalities in self-assessed health status in Liberia' (2018) *Global Health Action* 11, 3

<sup>17</sup> Saul Ngarava and others, 'Gender and ethnic disparities in energy poverty: The case of South Africa' (2022) *Energy Policy*, 161

energy for household needs. Similar disparities are reported in West Africa, where cultural and social barriers such as the preferential treatment of boys relative to education, household chores, and leadership in homes and communities relegate women to time-consuming efforts such as collecting biomass and firewood in efforts to address energy poverty<sup>18</sup>. The resulting opportunity cost bore by women and girls in SSA, who spend between 2-9 hours daily collecting firewood and other sources of locally available fuel includes foregoing income-earning activities and, often, education<sup>19</sup>. Gender disparities in access to energy across SSA are not limited to the time and opportunity cost borne by women and girls who spend hours every week collecting firewood and other cheap sources of energy due to a lack of access to more efficient sources of energy. Electricity access statistics across the continent reflect similar disparities as well. Overall, electricity use and access in SSA are gendered, with women having less access to electricity and using the form of energy less compared to men<sup>20</sup>. While this is not unique to Africa, SSA is significantly affected by gendered access to energy since women in regions and households with low Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) have less favourable outcomes in multiple dimensions of energy services, including knowledge, utilization, and opinion<sup>21</sup>. These disparities are worsened by the economic disparities between men and women in SSA. The disparities limit women's ability to afford efficient sources of power as well as their power to make decisions affecting energy use in their homes. This, in turn, limits their contributions to decisions ranging from major choices such as electricity connectivity to smaller decisions such as the choice of appliances at the household level<sup>22</sup>.

The gender disparities in access to energy in SSA have significant implications on women's health, education, work, knowledge, power, and participation in decision-making. First, women in SSA, particularly in the rural areas, have limited access to electricity and modern, efficient, and affordable sources of energy. Consequently, they rely on firewood, kerosene, charcoal, and plant biomass as a source of energy for household uses such as cooking. These sources of energy are associated with respiratory infections and increase the risk of fires and carbon

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<sup>18</sup> Akabuiro Dominic, 'Energy Poverty And Gender Inequality In West Africa: An International Human Rights Law Perspective' (2024) Women and the Energy Sector [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377828282\\_Gender\\_and\\_Energy\\_Poverty\\_in\\_Africa\\_An\\_Intersectional\\_Approach](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377828282_Gender_and_Energy_Poverty_in_Africa_An_Intersectional_Approach) accessed 14 May 2024

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Winther Tanja, 'Women's empowerment through electricity access: scoping study and proposal for a framework of analysis' (2017) *Journal of Development Effectiveness* 9

<sup>21</sup> Zhang Alice, 'Evidence of multidimensional gender inequality in energy services from a large-scale household survey in India' (2022) *Nature Energy* 7

<sup>22</sup> Winther Tanja, 'In the light of what we cannot see: Exploring the interconnections between gender and electricity access' (2020) *Energy Research & Social Science* 60

monoxide poisoning<sup>23</sup>. With women in SSA doing the majority of household duties, they are more vulnerable to the negative health effects of these inefficient sources of energy. Second, the collection of alternative sources of energy, particularly firewood, which is used widely across rural SSA, is a duty that is primarily performed by women and girls. In East Africa, women and girls collect firewood from forests and wooded areas, exposing them to the risk of physical injuries and wild animal attacks<sup>24</sup>. Additionally, women from communities all over SSA who practice head-loading by carrying firewood and other plant biomass on their heads are at an increased risk of impaired neuromusculoskeletal health, with most of them reporting neuromusculoskeletal pain in their cervical, thoracic, and cervical vertebrae, shoulders, arms, knees, and legs<sup>25</sup>. Second, the opportunity cost of limited access to efficient, affordable, and clean energy restricts women from engaging in income-earning activities, limiting their earning potential. On average, women and girls spend 2-9 hours a week in search of sources of energy for cooking and lighting<sup>26</sup>. The opportunity cost of this time is high since it could have been spent on income-generating activities and education. Third, women are less knowledgeable and have little involvement in energy decisions compared to men<sup>27</sup>. This is the result of a combination of social and cultural norms that limit women's involvement and participation in overall decision-making and the impact of these norms on women's education and economic participation. Their limited knowledge and involvement in energy decisions prevent women from advocating for decisions that would make their lives easier, such as the use of energy sources and appliances that make domestic chores easier and less time-consuming.

The gender disparities in access to energy and their impacts on women's lives are pervasive across SSA. In South Africa, for instance, girls and women who reportedly carry firewood loads of between 2-35 kg on their heads for long distances of up to 10 km were found to have impaired neuromusculoskeletal health and medial-lateral proprioception<sup>28</sup>. In rural Kenya, where a substantial percentage of women lack access to electricity, women and girls report two categories of health problems related to energy poverty. These include the injuries and safety risks they face during the collection of biomass and firewood and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Njenga M, Gitau J and Mendum R, 'Women's work is never done: Lifting the gendered burden of firewood collection and household energy use in Kenya' (2021) *Energy Research & Social Science* 77

<sup>25</sup> Montaug Tebogo, Ellapen Terry and Paul Yvonne, 'The consequence of head-loading on the neuro-musculoskeletal health of the I Lembe District youth of KwaZulu-Natal' (2022) *African Journal of Disability* 11

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

the negative effects of using the sources of energy on their health such as respiratory problems stemming from the use of open fires for cooking, lighting, and heating in poorly ventilated areas<sup>29</sup>. In the West African countries of Nigeria and the Gambia, cultural and social norms that institute the subordination of women to men culminate in women experiencing energy poverty disproportionately. For instance, gender roles that make related chores such as fetching firewood and cooking the primary responsibility of girls and women increase the incidence of respiratory diseases among them and put them at an increased risk of fire-related injuries<sup>30</sup>. Additionally, the amount of time and energy expended in the search, collection, and usage of inefficient sources of energy, robs them of economic opportunities, with the total losses attributed to these gender inequalities in energy access across Africa estimated at \$36.9 billion annually<sup>31</sup>.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Various feminist theories apply to the current state of energy policy across SSA, explaining the inherent exclusion of women in influencing, contributing to, and benefiting from various policies across the region. One such theory is the Feminist Theory. The theory emerged as a way of conceptualizing discrimination against women by understanding the systems used to perpetuate oppression and harm against them<sup>32</sup>. It provides a framework to deconstruct systems of knowledge, historical events, and practices that uphold or express the patriarchal power relations responsible for issues such as gender inequality. Essentially, the theory is founded on the need to deconstruct oppressive systems of power and explores the relationship between gender and social, cultural, economic, and political structures<sup>33</sup>. Specifically, it focuses on three primary constructs namely race, gender, and class, and explores the experiences of women in the contexts of gender inequality, oppression, roles, objectification, and division of labor<sup>34</sup>. These constructs link the theory to energy policy in SSA fundamentally. First gender inequality is inherent in the policies governing energy access, efficiency, and affordability across SSA. Gender disparity is rife in the careers and leadership roles that make crucial decisions in the energy sector across Africa, with the continent's women relegated to producing and managing energy

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Untimeliness of Feminist Theory' (2010) *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 18 1

<sup>33</sup> Nkansah Joan, 'Using Feminist Theory as a Lens in Educational Research' (2023) *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 13 1

<sup>34</sup> Ibid



at the household level through activities such as collecting firewood<sup>35</sup>. Men, on the other hand, are represented in the energy sector and are involved in making, influencing, and implementing policies and decisions related to energy. This distribution of gender roles and the power to influence or make energy policies and decisions are rooted in gender roles in African communities, which place women lower in the social hierarchy, often resulting in long-term effects such as limited education, exclusion from economic participation, and underrepresentation in crucial sectors and leadership roles. These effects perpetuate a vicious cycle of gender disparity in access to energy, participation in energy decisions, and contribution to energy policies. The Feminist Theory can be used to analyze and reshape energy policies in SSA by guiding the identification of the oppressive systems that limit women's participation in the formulation of energy policies to aid in the development of mitigating strategies.

A second theory that relates to energy policies and acknowledges the pervasive gender disparities in energy access in SSA is the Matrix of Domination framework, which explores the relationship between the systems through which oppression is perpetuated namely race, gender, class, and all other categories under which marginalized and othered people fall<sup>36</sup>. Women fall under the categories of marginalized and othered groups. In fact, the theory was first used in relation to the oppression of black American women. Essentially, the framework posits that the position of an individual in society comprises multiple standpoints as opposed to a single standpoint. Therefore, context, rather than inherent traits such as gender, age, or class, defines an oppressed group and identifies its oppressors<sup>37</sup>. The evaluation of energy policies in SSA identifies various contexts in which women and girls are affected by the current energy policies and the systems responsible for these incidences. Notably, the theory invites the inference that all women and girls do not experience the effects of energy policies in the same manner. This could explain why energy policies that exacerbate or uphold existing gender disparities in relation to access, affordability, and consistency persist regardless of the gradual rise in female representation in energy sectors across SSA. Granted, changes in energy policies to reflect the needs of women will be gradual. However, the growing involvement and participation of more women in policy formulation is yet to yield any significant changes in the policies to address the widespread gender disparities. The Matrix of Domination can be used to analyze and adapt energy policies in SSA to reflect and uphold equal

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<sup>35</sup> Allen Elizabeth, Lyons Hannah and Stephens Jennie, 'Women's leadership in renewable transformation, energy justice and energy democracy: Redistributing power' (2019) *Energy Research & Social Science* <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629619300829> accessed 14 May 2024

<sup>36</sup> Limpangog Cirila, 'Matrix of Domination' (2016) Wiley

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

access to clean, affordable, and sustainable energy through the contextual evaluation of gender disparities in relation to energy. Rather than evaluate the disparities based on a single standpoint of gender, the framework can influence the consideration of other moderating factors, including rural versus urban settings, level of education, social class, income level, occupation or profession, and energy needs. The different contexts will guide the development of energy policies that meet the energy needs of all genders while driving the continent toward energy sustainability.

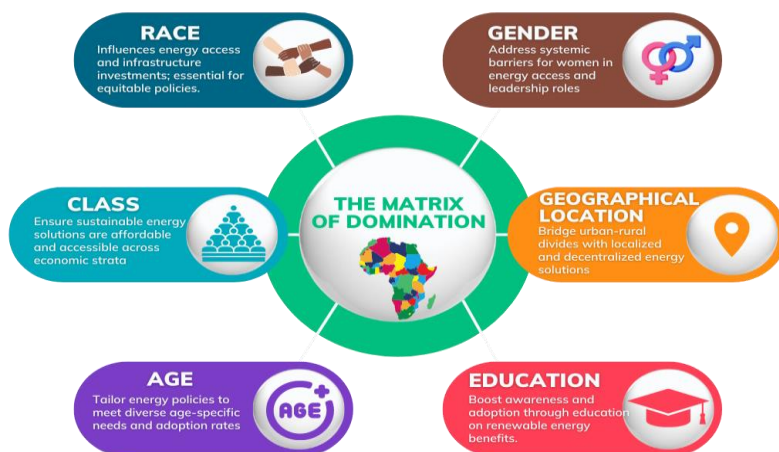


Figure 1: The Matrix of Domination in Sustainable Energy

A third framework known as the Black Feminist Thought theory is founded on the belief that shared experiences of black womanhood around race, gender, class, and sexuality create group knowledge from which the group can develop a standpoint for use in resisting oppression<sup>38</sup>. The framework is principled on the uniqueness of the experiences of black women, the acknowledgment of their pluralism, and the pursuit of equity in society<sup>39</sup>. Whilst the theory was developed in relation to black women, it applies to other oppressed and

<sup>38</sup> De Sousa Ismalia, 'Centering Black feminist thought in nursing praxis' (2021) *Nursing Inquiry* 29 1

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

marginalized communities as well. In SSA, for instance, the theory applies to energy policies in its potential to serve as a source of information on how the current energy policies affect women and how they can be reshaped to meet the needs of girls and women better. Drawing from the pluralism of women and girls' experiences such as access to energy, their energy needs, and how the current policies fall short of meeting them, policymakers in the energy sector can use the theory to influence policies that meet the needs of all Africans regardless of their gender, class, and other biological and social constructs.

## **6. POLICY ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE**

The existing energy policies in SSA prioritize access, affordability, and a transition to modern energy, with newer policies targeting renewable and sustainable energy. In East Africa, for instance, energy policies are categorized into policies that govern the transmission and interconnectivity of power, policies that govern the use of fossil fuels as a source of energy, and policies that promote sustainability in energy production and use. This last category of policies is further broken down into policies that focus on the adoption of new and renewable sources of energy, policies that promote energy conservation strategies, and policies that establish and govern energy efficiency<sup>40</sup>. Individual East African countries reflect these strategies but make limited or no reference to gender. Kenya's energy policy, for instance, identifies various sources of energy such as fossil fuels, geothermal, and hydropower, and acknowledges that the majority of the country relies on biomass such as firewood for energy, with petroleum and electricity generating 22% and 9% of the country energy<sup>41</sup>. The national policy highlights three primary factors. The first factor is Kenya's electrification strategy, which promises to ensure that all households and businesses are connected to the national grid. Second, the policy highlights the country's affordable energy strategy, which promises to make energy production efficient and sustainable, and finally, it features the country's investment strategy, which focuses on investing and attracting investment in the energy sector. In addition to its current energy policies, the country's energy transition policy includes decentering fossil fuels as a source of energy by incentivizing and security investment in renewable energy, establishing renewable energy produced in the country as an alternative to oil, and entering the international energy market, and establishing national independence by producing enough energy to meet domestic demand. While these policies are comprehensive,

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<sup>40</sup> East African Community, 'Energy' (2024) <https://www.eac.int/energy> Accessed 14 May 2024

<sup>41</sup> Republic of Kenya Ministry of Energy, 'National Energy Policy' (2018) [https://kplc.co.ke/img/full/BL4PdOqKtxFT\\_National%20Energy%20Policy%20October%20%202018.pdf](https://kplc.co.ke/img/full/BL4PdOqKtxFT_National%20Energy%20Policy%20October%20%202018.pdf) accessed 14 May 2024

their mention of and focus on gender are limited to an acknowledgment that women are marginalized relative to access to clean, affordable, and sustainable sources of energy<sup>42</sup>. Consequently, while the East African Community acknowledges that women and girls are affected disproportionately by energy poverty and related challenges, their policies demonstrate little effort to address the challenges.

Similar policies exist across other East and Southern African countries, including Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritius, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Eswatini, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The energy policies in these countries feature common goals such as the connection of more households and businesses to the national grid, the transition to renewable and sustainable energy, and gender integration. However, their gender integration approaches are limited to superficial references to gender issues without actionable plans to address gender disparities relative to energy<sup>43</sup>. These references to gender include the acknowledgment of the need for women's participation in policy formulation and implementation in the sector, the recognition of their role as the providers of the energy consumed in their households, links to women's access to energy and their empowerment, and calls for strategies to enhance their access to energy<sup>44</sup>. However, none of the policies provide actionable steps towards bridging the gap between women and access to energy, participation in the formulation of energy policies, and guaranteeing their participation in the transition to sustainable energy.

In West African countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Togo, Sierra Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, and Cabo Verde, regional and national energy policies focus on extending the current electricity coverage to rural and peri-urban areas, increasing the ratio of renewable to non-renewable energy, and mainstreaming gender in the transition to renewable and sustainable energy. Notably, the regional policies adopted by West African countries under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) emphasize the need for mainstreaming gender in energy policy<sup>45</sup>. Unlike their East African counterparts, West African countries have established some actionable steps towards integrating gender into energy

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> UN Women, 'Gender, Energy and Policy' (2018) file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/GenderEnergyandPolicy-AReviewofEnergyPoliciesinEastandSouthernAfrica-Web-HR.pdf accessed 14 May 2024

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> ECREE, 'Situation Analysis of Energy and Gender Issues in ECOWAS Member States' (2015) <https://seforall.org/sites/default/files/Situation-Analysis-of-Energy-and-Gender-Issues.pdf> accessed 14 May 2024

policies. One notable policy is the establishment of a fund by respective West African governments, which is mandated to support innovative energy-related projects by women in addition to building women's capacity to participate in the energy sector, engage in advocacy for energy policies, and mainstream gender in large-scale energy projects<sup>46</sup>. Similarly, the states recognize the disproportional time and energy spent by women in their role as the energy producers in their homes. Consequently, they have adopted policies to promote gender equality in the control of energy resources, extend rural electrification and the use of renewable energy to reduce women's burden of work. This has been achieved through strategies such as promoting alternatives to firewood and biomass to reduce the burden of collecting plant biomass, which falls on women<sup>47</sup>. However, despite these policies, gender disparities in access to energy, participation in policy-making, and participation in large-scale energy projects persist.

Evidently, various countries and regional blocs in SSA acknowledge gender disparities in access to affordable energy, the disproportionate burden placed on women in the region to provide energy for their households' needs, and the underrepresentation of women in contributing to, influencing, or making energy policies. However, some countries have not done much to address the resulting gender disparities beyond highlighting the disparities and the need to address them. Others have developed progressive policies to address the expansive gender disparities in energy access, projects, and policy. However, the policies and their implementation have not translated into policy and neither have they changed the status quo. Women across SSA are still marginalized, invisible, and relatively voiceless in policy-making, which is attributed to restrictive laws and barriers, institutional barriers, disproportional access to education, and limited access to or ownership of resources<sup>48</sup>. Consequently, women are still a far way off from achieving energy justice and are bound in a vicious cycle of resource scarcity, limited opportunities to contribute to energy policy, limited knowledge stemming from barriers to access to education, and limited financing for energy-related projects<sup>49</sup>.

## 7. PROPOSING POLICY REFORMS

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ilesanmi Oluwatoyin, 'Women's Visibility in Decision Making Processes in Africa—Progress, Challenges, and Way Forward' (2018) *Frontiers in Sociology* 3

<sup>49</sup> Mang-Benza Carelle, 'Making energy justice work for women in rural sub-Saharan Africa: A qualitative diagnostic from Benin, Senegal, and Togo' (2023) *Energy Policy* 173

The above shortcomings of energy policies across SSA, particularly their failure to either mainstream gender or establish specific actionable steps for the involvement of women, recognition of their needs, and creation of policies that address them, warrant a re-evaluation of current policies to integrate gender justice. This can be achieved through the application of the principles of gender-just policies, which include acknowledging the different energy dynamics held by men and women, providing complete and equal access to modern energies and technologies, and recognizing the rights of all genders to participate in policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring<sup>50</sup>. As noted earlier, most African countries have successfully implemented the first principle albeit partially by acknowledging the different gender dynamics in providing energy in the majority of African households, particularly those in rural areas. They can take the next step by using this information to devise policies that meet these needs such as mandating the production and distribution of appliances that are compatible with sustainable energy, involving women in sustainable energy policies, and incentivizing innovation in the types of energy collected by women such as plant biomass through funding. Second, the countries can integrate public participation into their policy formulation processes and institute gender quotas for the forums to ensure gender balance in their contribution to policies. Third, SSA can continue its campaign to improve gender balance in the energy sector by eliminating the exclusion of women from school to employment in the sector through actionable steps such as scholarships to get women into STEM, elimination of barriers to entry into the energy sector, and elimination of barriers to entry to decision-making and leadership roles in the industry. These strategies, together with policies providing funding for women-led energy projects and the earlier-proposed inclusion of women in public participation forums for the formulation of energy policy, will empower women to join the energy sector and encourage the women within the sector to contribute to policy formulation and implementation.

The successful implementation of the proposed policy reforms requires the application of various decolonization approaches to energy governance. The first step in decolonizing energy poverty and injustice is acknowledging the existence of energy injustice<sup>51</sup>. Second, the experiences of all producers and users of energy across SSA should be considered in the decisions that influence energy governance. Granted, SSA is yet to achieve universal electricity connectivity, which takes priority over an overhaul of energy production from unsustainable

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<sup>50</sup> Feenstra Marielle and Ozerol Gul, 'Energy justice as a search light for gender-energy nexus: Towards a conceptual framework' (2021) *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 138

<sup>51</sup> Tornel Carlos, 'Decolonizing energy justice from the ground up: Political ecology, ontology, and energy landscapes' (2022) *Progress in Human Geography* 47 1

sources to renewable and more sustainable sources of energy. However, the continent can revise its priorities gradually to incorporate the needs of its population, the well-being of its environment, and the sustainable sources of energy that are compatible with its social, cultural, political, and economic development goals. Together, these approaches can transform energy governance in SSA, address gender disparities in energy access, policy formulation, and affordability, and establish successful strategies in the continent's transition to sustainable energy.

## **8. CASE STUDIES OF INTEGRATED APPROACHES**

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has yet to fully integrate gender justice into its energy transition strategies. However, a few countries and projects across the continent demonstrate the potential for successful universal gender mainstreaming in energy governance across the continent. For instance, Namibia has done relatively well in mainstreaming gender in its national policies, including its energy transition policies. The country, which lies on the southwestern coast of Africa, was recently ranked 8th globally on the gender equality chart and ranks above the United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, and the United States with a gender gap that is over 80% closed<sup>52</sup>. Namibia's progress in closing its gender gap is reflected in its energy sector in various ways. First, the country's efforts to empower women across all sectors of the economy include the establishment of funding opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the energy sector. Women and other groups of the Namibian society, including people with disabilities and the youth, are part of the country's national energy policy, which mandates the three groups access to resources and opportunities for economic development to improve their lives and eradicate poverty<sup>53</sup>. The country's efforts to close the gender gap and include women in its sustainable energy policies are not limited to women empowerment. Namibia sets an example for the rest of SSA in including women in leadership and decision-making roles in the energy sector, with 43% of leadership roles in the country's energy sector being held by women<sup>54</sup>. Part of Namibia's success in integrating gender justice in its energy policies and involving women in the transition to sustainable energy is attributed to the country's consideration of women's needs and their integration into policy. Women were involved in crucial activities such as the classification and

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<sup>52</sup> Ruggeri Amanda, 'The world's most gender-equal countries' (BBC, 29 September 2023) <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20230927-the-worlds-most-gender-equal-countries> accessed 15 May 2024

<sup>53</sup> USAID, 'USAID SOUTHERN AFRICA ENERGY PROGRAM – GENDER ACTION PLAN' (2017) [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00WZZR.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WZZR.pdf) accessed 15 May 2024

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

pricing of energy tariffs and provisions were made for their participation and representation in forums to develop ideas on achieving universal rural electrification<sup>55</sup>. Further, women's participation was mandated and encouraged in training opportunities that provided technical assistance to help the public understand and contribute to energy efficiency and renewable energy projects<sup>56</sup>. Together, these efforts to mainstream gender in decisions on both existing energy governance decisions such as extending electricity coverage to connect all households to the national grid, and newer programmes such as renewable energy projects were effective in setting Namibia up to reduce the gender gap in the energy sector.

Ultimately, Namibia has made progress and various positive outcomes are palpable. These include the increased representation of women in the energy sector, including in leadership roles, the involvement of all genders in public participation to inform policy formulation, and the economic empowerment of women to participate in the energy sector, which is supplemented with training to align their participation with the country's policies on the energy transition. From these positive outcomes, the rest of SSA can draw lessons such as the need for women's empowerment through funding, training, and capacity building to increase their contributions to sustainable energy projects, the benefits of their involvement in public participation forums, and incorporating their needs and insight into energy policy, and the implications of both on women's representation in careers in the energy sector.

## 9. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Some potential challenges and barriers to the implementation of the proposed reforms could arise. These include partial approaches to policy formulation and power dynamics at the household, community, and national levels<sup>57</sup>. Most energy policies in SSA are partial and one-dimensional, focusing on specific issues as opposed to taking holistic approaches and addressing more challenges. An example of such approaches is projects to extend electricity connectivity that focus on connecting households to the national grid without taking into consideration other factors such as the ability of women-led households to afford electricity. This results in one-dimensional policies that worsen gender disparities relative to energy. Second, power dynamics, which are the result of socio-

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Owusu-Manu De-Graft, 'Improving women's energy access, rights and equitable sustainable development: a Ghanaian perspective' (2022) *Ecofeminism and Climate Change* 3 1



economic, cultural, and political factors affect both the proposed reforms and the formulation and implementation of gender-just policies<sup>58</sup>. The culture and social organization of most communities across SSA and some national laws in African countries drive the marginalization and invisibility of women<sup>59</sup>. Consequently, women across the continent disproportionately perform domestic labor such as sourcing energy for cooking but are side lined in energy-related decisions such as the type of energy used in their households. Their marginalization is evident in their access to healthcare, education, financial services, employment opportunities, and other resources<sup>60</sup>. Women's inherent limitations in access to these crucial services and resources affect their participation in policy formulation in the energy sector as contributors in public participation forums, champions of the recognition of their needs in policies, decision-makers in various positions in the energy sector, and entrepreneurs in sustainable energy. Fortunately, Namibia's progress in entrenching gender justice in its energy policies offers hope that other countries can overcome these barriers and challenges to integrate gender justice into their energy transitions.

## 10. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, gender inequality is rife in SSA. National and regional governance efforts are targeting these inequalities in various sectors of the economy. In the energy sector, gender inequalities are evident in the exclusion of women in leadership, decision-making, and other roles, the lack of consideration of women's needs in the formulation of energy policies, and the sidelining of women in driving the energy transition to sustainable energy. The decolonization of the power dynamics that perpetuate and exacerbate these gender inequalities uncovered the need to incorporate feminist frameworks such as the Feminist Theory to prompt decision-makers in the energy sector to entrench gender justice in energy justice to yield inclusive policies that advance the green and sustainable energy agenda. By addressing the identified problems from their root causes, which are entrenched in social, cultural, and political power dynamics, governments across SSA can integrate gender justice into their energy transitions to sustainable energy.

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<sup>58</sup> Musango Josephine, 'Mainstreaming gender to achieve security of energy services in poor urban environments' (2020) *Energy Research & Social Science* 70

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Ibid