

THOUGHT PIECE | From Top-Down to Bottom-Up

Gender & Justice in Africa's Energy Shift

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR A GENDER-JUST TRANSITION IN AFRICA

Gender-Inclusive Planning is Crucial

Women's traditional knowledge systems and lived experiences should be integrated into Africa's energy transitions to avoid marginalisation from top-down approaches. Overlooking these contributions risks deepening inherent and existing gender inequalities in access, decision making and benefits.

Energy Justice Requires a Gendered Perspective

Gender-responsive policies are critical to ensuring that renewable energy solutions do not inadvertently widen gender disparities but instead empower women through improved energy access and economic opportunities.

Rethinking Distributive Justice

Energy justice should encompass more than fair employment and financial improvement to consider the roles women play in Africa's informal economies, which may be central to local livelihoods. Ignoring the ways in which women participate in informal economies perpetuates exclusion and limits the transformative potential of the just transition.

Procedural Justice Requires Inclusive Participation

Women must have a meaningful decision-making role in shaping Africa's energy future. Inclusive participation is essential for ensuring that women's voices are not only heard but actively shape policies and solutions.

Bottom-Up Approaches are Essential for a Just Transition

Locally-driven, gender-progressive solutions are vital to ensure that Africa's transition to sustainable energy is truly just. Indigenous knowledge and informal economies must be recognised and valued in order to create resilient, inclusive and sustainable transition pathways.

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INTRODUCTION

The promise of a Just Energy Transition (JET) is one of inclusion, sustainability, and fairness. It envisions a future where communities, particularly the most vulnerable, benefit from the shift towards low-emission development and clean energy. If the distinctive contexts of women in Africa are not fully considered, this transition may exacerbate existing injustices, reinforcing patriarchal and extractivist structures that have long governed access to resources, decision-making and economic opportunity.

For women in Africa, a Just Energy Transition (JET) requires tackling structural barriers like land tenure, limited access to finance and education, and ingrained gender norms. There is a critical need for research aimed at creating an inclusive energy transition that ensures women's resource access, enhances their role in climate policy and decision-making, formalises their economic contributions, and acknowledges their traditional ecological knowledge. However, much of the current literature on energy transitions originates from institutions in the global North, lacking insights into the local nuances of energy access and gender dynamics in Africa.

To bridge this gap, the Operationalising Just Transitions in Africa (OJTA) programme, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), is conducting research to explore how a truly just transition can take shape within the African context. The programme's forthcoming publication, *Operationalising the Just Energy Transition in Africa: Possibilities and Pathways in an Uneven Global Context*, aims to bolster the knowledge base by highlighting emerging research on Africa's unique just transition challenges.

One of the publication's central themes addresses the question of how to achieve a just transition that is both gender- and energy-just. Authors **Mistancia Kanengoni**, **Nelson Chege** & **Sam Nyamwange**, **Sandra Bhatsara**, and **Priyanka Ukabhai** explore the necessity of gender-informed frameworks to ensure inclusivity. Drawing on real-world case studies, they argue that just transition approaches should prioritise qualitative improvements in livelihood quality over purely quantitative economic growth.

THE NEED FOR GENDER-INCLUSIVE ENERGY TRANSITION PLANNING

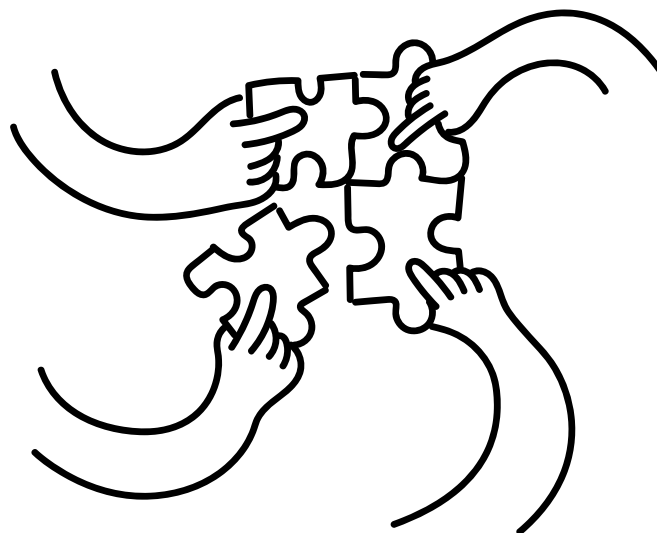
Women in Africa deploy diverse strategies to manage energy and resources, including informal resource-sharing networks, community-based practices and indigenous knowledge systems. These strategies are integral to local livelihoods and provide women with some control over natural resources. The continuing global dialogue on energy transition has the potential to disrupt these existing knowledge systems. While some of these strategies may not be classified as 'green,' they confer authority to women over local resources. A poorly managed energy transition could inadvertently undermine this authority, exacerbating existing gender inequalities.

Incorporating women into energy transition planning is essential to prevent further marginalisation and to leverage their expertise in shaping inclusive energy policies. A key critique of the prevailing approach to JET is its 'top-down' nature, which prioritises economic growth over qualitative aspects of livelihoods. This perspective tends to overlook the lived experiences of women. However, initiatives such as COP Mashinani (discussed below) demonstrate effective mechanisms for integrating women's participation, ensuring that their voices are central to transition processes.

GENDER AND ENERGY JUSTICE: KEY ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

In their chapters, authors Bhatsara and Ukabhai examine the necessity of integrating gender and energy justice within JET frameworks to develop equitable policies. Bhatsara argues that the feminisation of energy poverty stems from limitations imposed by the developmental perspective of JET, particularly for communities affected by large-scale energy infrastructure projects. She warns against the superficial incorporation of gender discourse in development agendas, which may prioritise financing strategies over genuine gender equity. Building on this, Bhatsara highlights the persistent barriers in the energy sector that necessitate stronger gender-responsive policies. She underscores that without deliberate efforts to integrate gender perspectives, the transition risks perpetuating historical inequities rather than addressing them.

Ukabhai, on the other hand, critically examines the notion of 'justice' within JET frameworks. Initially focused on labour security in the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy, the concept has evolved to address broader social equity issues. However, JET frameworks, for the most part, lack a common understanding of what 'justice' entails. Ukabhai underscores the need to incorporate a gendered perspective of distributive and procedural justice to achieve an equitable transition.



RETHINKING DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Distributive justice refers to the fair and equitable distribution of both the benefits and burdens of the energy transition. Traditionally, it has been understood in terms of rectifying job losses and profit gains from emerging green industries. However, in OJTA's forthcoming publication, Ukabhai argues that this interpretation must go beyond industry-specific concerns and address the structural barriers and inequalities inherent in these systems.

For instance, as highlighted in Kanengoni's chapter on women in Madziva, Zimbabwe, patriarchal institutions obstruct women's participation in formal economic systems. As a result, women develop alternative empowerment mechanisms, such as social structures and reciprocity-based support networks. Many of these methods, including small-scale farming and mining, are considered 'unsustainable' within the energy transition discourse. Yet, they provide women with spaces of authority. If transition measures disregard these informal empowerment dynamics, they risk stripping women of control over natural resources, excluding them from decision-making, and deepening cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Similarly, Muzenje's chapter on lithium mining in Mberengwa, Zimbabwe, reveals the top-down nature of JET, particularly in the context of global demand for lithium—a critical mineral for sustainable energy storage and transportation. In response to this demand, the state has taken ownership of lithium mines and their profits.

THE ROLE OF PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Procedural justice refers to equitable, inclusive, and transparent stakeholder participation in decision-making and governance to achieve energy justice. However, questions arise about who qualifies as a 'stakeholder' and what constitutes 'participation.' Ukabhai poses the question, "Are decision-making forums structured to empower all participants equitably?"

In their chapter on energy justice among the Maasai women of Isinya, south of Nairobi in Kenya, Chege and Nyamwange argue that participatory justice can be achieved through a gendered lens. They emphasise the importance of bottom-up approaches over dominant top-down models in JET frameworks. Their research highlights the COP Mashinani approach (loosely translated as a grassroots COP), which addresses logistical barriers such as language and accessibility to foster meaningful engagement.

COP MASHINANI is an initiative that employs storytelling as a fundamental methodology to engage marginalised communities and incorporate their perspectives into climate policy frameworks. It operates alongside the annual UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP).

Through storytelling as a medium for shaping policy and shifting societal norms, Chege and Nyamwange advocate for participatory justice that transcends formal language, technical jargon, and rigid data formats. By integrating women's lived experiences and recognising an intersection with socio-economic and cultural issues, a more inclusive and just transition can be realised.



CONCLUSION

A truly just energy transition in Africa must be both gender-inclusive and context-specific. As will be highlighted in the upcoming publication, the dominant top-down approach often neglects the lived experiences of women, reinforcing pre-existing inequalities. Achieving a just transition requires a shift towards bottom-up frameworks that recognise and integrate indigenous knowledge systems, informal empowerment mechanisms, and participatory justice.

By addressing both distributive and procedural justice, policies can ensure that women and other marginalised groups are not only included but also empowered in the energy transition process.

While the pool of resources remains limited, there are a handful of promising publications sharing frameworks and insights on how to navigate the global South, particularly Africa's energy future, centring gender justice within JET frameworks to foster a truly inclusive and sustainable transition. These include publications such as:

- [Empowering women in just transitions - Insights from the GLOW programme](#)
- [Towards a gender just transition: Principles and perspectives from the global South](#)
- [Tools for a gender responsive transition to the green economy: a step-by-step methodology to integrating gender in long-term low emissions development strategies \(LT-LEDS\) based in the case of Burkina Faso](#)

The findings to be presented in the book *Operationalising the Just Energy Transition in Africa: Possibilities and Pathways in an Uneven Global Context* aim to contribute to this knowledge base with learning from localised solutions that prioritise social equity alongside economic and environmental goals.

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