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# Public Ownership and Energy Democracy: Struggles for a Feminist Transition<sup>2</sup>

A feminist energy transition is one that works for everyone. Clearly, that is more easily said than done. Public services including energy supply have been under attack for decades. People have become used to price hikes, job cuts, reduced quality and ultimately, a break-down of the social fabric. Many people have lost sight of the fact that energy is a fundamental right on which human and other life depends, rather than a commodity for profit. How can public ownership and energy democracy offer a way out?

For-profit economics, underpinning virtually every energy privatisation and market liberalisation around the world, is the biggest barrier to putting the rallying cries for climate action and system change into practice. For as long as energy - and the energy transition alike - is something to be profited from, the rush for fossil fuels alongside renewables will continue to result in an ever expanding energy mix, both in terms of production and consumption. In previous years, only half of new energy demand was met with renewables. Global carbon emissions from carbon fuels reached a record high in 2023. And the villains are not just the fossil fuel giants. Between 2016 and 2022, some of the world's biggest 'green' multinationals, such as Tesla, Siemens and Iberdrola have profited over US\$175 billion. This is more than

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seven times the real financial support that rich countries have provided to poor nations to tackle and adapt to climate change (despite pledging US\$100 billion a year in 2009). The underlying dynamic: private and multinational companies merely invest in the transition when public funds secure their profits. But climate and energy policies that are propping up profits give vested interests all the more reason to push up energy production and consumption. This is making it impossible to decarbonise society, with ever more devastating impacts on future generations and already discriminated groups, such as gendered and racialised working class communities.

How can we make sure a feminist energy transition is the solution? As the Energy Democracy Declaration, created by a variety of Indigenous representatives, trade unions, ecofeminists and climate justice organisations, points out: through policies that combine defending and advancing peoples' right to energy with urgently curbing consumption and adapting to the climate crisis. To address these dimensions jointly and not let one undermine the other, we must talk about ownership and control. Through an expansive understanding of public ownership and popular participation, dissident genders - together with the whole public - collectively decide how, why, where, and with which resources and technologies, energy is used and produced.

Public ownership constellations, that combine State-owned enterprises with more localised governance, are the policy prerequisite for the popular classes to be in charge in a coordinated fashion. This is not an apology for reckless (multi)national oil companies, such as those based in the Gulf, or for (other) State-owned enterprises that are colonizing lands, grabbing critical raw materials, and dispossessing entire rural communities, Indigenous or otherwise, in the name of an energy transition. This is the basic recognition that in order to meet peoples' energy needs, whilst tackling the climate crisis we must envision systemic alternatives - and public ownership can be exactly that. Especially when struggles go beyond reclaiming the energy sector from the market and beyond establishing government control. For public

energy systems are public in as much as they are democratic. Although this is true for all public services, it is particularly urgent for the energy sector due to all the extractivism pertaining to the whole energy value chain. Thus, ongoing social struggle and deep democratic decision-making is necessary to build up the feminist popular powers that can hold public energy to its values. This is surely a never ending struggle but based on Costa Rica's democratic banking model, which sits alongside its public energy sector described below, a key step would be to put gender justice in the legally binding mission and mandate of every state-owned energy company. On top of this, through gender-balanced boards a variety of energy workers and precarious users - from single parents to informal care workers and undocumented migrants - can attain decision making powers. And what if we would organise towards territory-wide energy observatories - mirroring the water observatories from Paris to the Catalan city of Terrassa that are improving water governance?

As feminists we must dare to advocate for public energy models that are rooted in justice, solidarity and democracy. This implies sensitivity to context and the need for bridges. Context is vital because there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Although public ownership must be understood as fundamentally at odds with the extraction of profits, how workers (women and otherwise), communities and governments co-shape the whole energy value chain must be a scaled endeavour aiming to align the concerns of all the rights-holders across a certain territory. This means making sure that national policies and ownership forms are informed by, reflecting and supportive of local realities, but also that communities work together to enable an equitable sharing of wealth, power and resources. More so, as a feminist energy transition will still depend on lots of land to put up solar and wind installations, it is key to involve rural, peasant and Indigenous communities in ways that can reverse centuries-long exploitive extraction. This can come in the form of Free, Prior and Informed Consent by making sure nearby communities, particularly but not solely Indigenous communities, are fundamentally involved

from project design and planning all the way to implementing and running (renewable) energy infrastructure. Then, meeting the energy needs surrounding populations will no longer be an after-thought but part of its core mission.

However, we should also not shy away from the technical complexities of the transition. The energy sector consists of massive infrastructure that spans from generation sites to high-voltage transmission lines to more regional distribution grids to supply facilities. And since the majority of people on this planet need more energy than they can locally produce, we have to figure out the interface between decentralized generation and accountable publicly owned electricity utilities. Again, that's not to excuse the extractivism for which many such utilities are responsible but to argue for transforming these utilities into a democratic undertaking that can uphold the right to sustainable energy whilst following the lead of affected communities. This surely requires equitable and participatory governance with poor, marginalised women, among others, in the driving seat.

Such a feminist energy model may actually enable societies to prioritize essential, social reproductive energy use - whether it is to keep hospitals, schools, water provision and public transport running, or power and make visible all the care, cooking and cleaning work that is still predominantly done by women. At the same time, public ownership is an encompassing approach that can once and for all curb the endless energy hunger that mainly benefits a rich and exploitative Global North, alongside pockets of elites across the Global South. Why? Because once energy is in public hands, populations themselves have finally a way in to design a comprehensive and coordinated phase out of fossil fuels, in parallel to a massive democratic ramping up of renewables. Altogether, this will help us to not only wind down fossil fuels but also put a stop to unnecessary if not excessive energy production and use. This way, we can speed up the transition whilst upholding peoples' right to increasingly clean, renewable energy.

A feminist energy model is not a pie in the sky but has been in the making for years, if not decades. In Catalonia, the Alli-

ance against Energy Poverty has been working predominantly with women in energy poverty to achieve legislation in 2015 that bans electricity cut offs. While, in the city of Cadiz, women have been leading on developing a social bonus on residential bills that much better reflects people's actual energy needs.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in Costa Rica, people and women in particular, have been resisting privatisation and improving public energy by forcing the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE), which is the state-owned utility, to engage in popular dialogue with affected communities. The success of Costa Rica's public energy consists of an effective State-municipal-cooperative model in which the utility is responsible for the bulk of all power generation, while working alongside more local public enterprises that serve the urban areas of the country and four big cooperatives that operate in the rural regions. Instead of market competition running the show as is the case in many other countries, collaboration is. And as a result, it is one of the few countries that has decarbonised its electricity mix at affordable rates. The take-away: gender-just energy requires a state that stands up against big business by daring to really share power with communities across the rural-urban spectrum.

Now, to not only put a stop to fossil fuel extraction but also stand up against the many forms of extractivism that are happening in the name of a transition, we must defend the right to land, the right to sustainable energy and the rights of women, girls and dissident genders, jointly. And based on many energy transition struggles around the world, public power combined with energy democracy is our best shot to do this.