Book examines connection between gender and cooking energy in Sub-Saharan Africa

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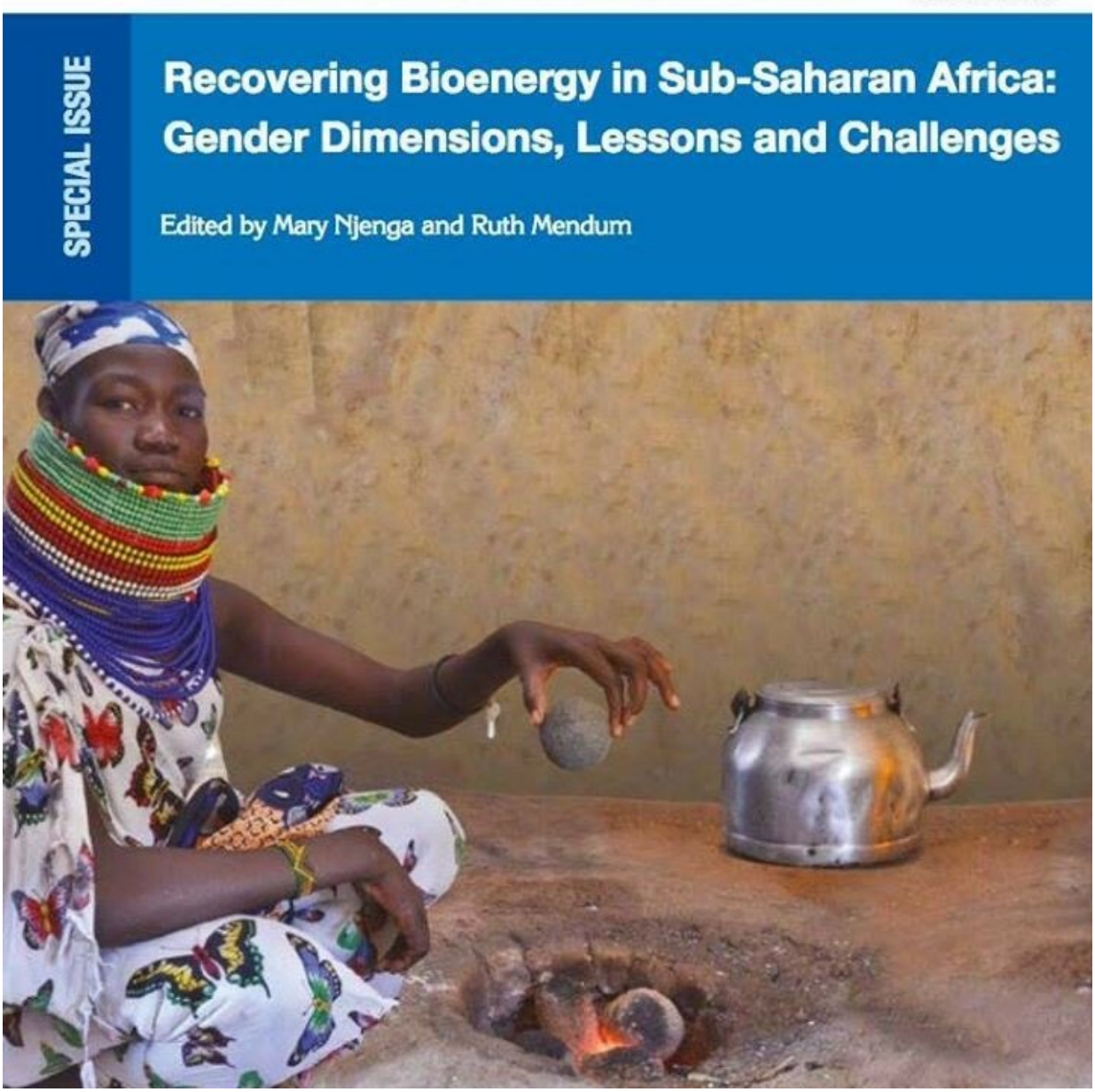

The book, “Recovering Bioenergy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Gender Dimensions, Lessons and Challenges," explores the connection between gender and cooking energy. Credit: Penn State

Providing energy for home use, especially for cooking food and heating living spaces, without contributing to climate change demands creativity and perseverance.

In many parts of the world, women are primarily responsible for cooking meals as part of a basket of demanding domestic chores. Accessing energy for cooking needs must fit women's time constraints and cultural preferences.

The link between gender and innovative energy use for food preparation is explored in a new book, "Recovering Bioenergy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Gender Dimensions, Lessons and Challenges," co-edited by Ruth Mendum, assistant research professor for gender initiatives in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences, and Mary Njenga, research scientist at the World Agroforestry Centre.

The work is an outgrowth of the Gender Research and Integrated Training initiative, also known as GRIT, which is a collaboration between the college's Office of International Programs and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, or CGIAR, a global consortium that unites organizations engaged in international research for a food-secure future.

The project was supported by CGIAR's program on Water, Land and Ecosystems under the sustaining rural-urban linkages flagship, Urban Food Plus, and the International Water Management Institute and World Agroforestry Centre.

"When most people think about energy, they think of electricity," said Mendum. "For home cooks, however, many other sources of thermal energy are preferable. This would include natural gas and propane in some regions and wood fuels such as firewood and charcoal in others."

In sub-Saharan Africa, cooking with wood over an open fire, particularly inside homes without chimneys, can be especially detrimental to women and girls, who are primarily responsible for meal preparation. Indoor smoke places cooks at higher risk for respiratory illnesses such as bronchitis, lung cancer and asthma.

Mendum and Njenga collected a range of case studies from communities, refugees, development practitioners, scholars and researchers in eastern and western Africa who are creating and marketing alternative forms of cleaner, renewable wood and waste-based energy sources for cooking.

The studies detail the triumphs—and challenges—faced by researchers and development practitioners as they implemented projects designed to empower women and girls by involving them in the energy-production and marketing processes.

More specifically, the stakeholders taught women how to turn agricultural waste, such as leftover banana leaves and peelings, and animal and human waste, into carbonized briquettes or biogas, both of which are inexpensive, high-quality and cleaner fuel sources that address some of the challenges in the existing cooking practices.

Mendum said that the case studies offer concrete examples of small-scale solutions to energy poverty that can make a significant difference in the lives of women and their communities, with the most important benefit being improved health.

Women and youth also can benefit financially by selling briquettes, an enterprise that requires little capital investment. And, of course, the transition to cleaner energy has numerous environmental advantages, such as cleaner air and water and healthy forests.

"We hope the book serves as a springboard for discussions with policymakers and other interested parties on how we can work together to implement these energy-chain activities to uplift marginalized communities," Mendum said. "We are proud that Penn State's GRIT program is a driving force in supporting women's empowerment and participation in cleaner energy entrepreneurship globally."

The GRIT program is part of the larger Gender Equity Through Agriculture Research and Education initiative at Penn State. This network of interdisciplinary scholars and researchers initiates and responds to new opportunities for research, instruction and evidence-based outreach that address the intersections of gender with agricultural and environment sciences, with the goals of providing benefits to poor rural women and men and empowering women and girls.

More information: M. Njenga et al. Recovering bioenergy in Sub-Saharan Africa: gender dimensions, lessons and challenges, (2018). DOI: 10.5337/2018.226

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