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## Energy Research & Social Science

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/erss](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/erss)



Original research article

# Green practices are gendered: Exploring gender inequality caused by sustainable consumption policies in Taiwan

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 24 July 2015  
Received in revised form 14 March 2016  
Accepted 14 March 2016  
Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Sustainable consumption  
Gender inequality  
Taiwan  
Global warming

### ABSTRACT

In the context of climate change, governments and international organizations often promote a “sustainable lifestyle.” However, this approach has been criticized for underestimating the complexity of everyday life and therefore being inapplicable to households and consumers. In addition, procedures for promoting sustainable consumption seldom incorporate domestic workers’ opinions and often increase women’s housework loads. This article employs a practice-based approach to examine the “Energy-Saving, Carbon Reduction” movement, a series of sustainable consumption policies that have been advocated by the Taiwanese government since 2008. The goal of the movement is to encourage an eco-friendly lifestyle. On the basis of empirical data collected through ethnographic interviews, this article argues that existing policies unexpectedly increase women’s burdens and exacerbate gender inequality.

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of climate change, governments and international organizations often promote a “sustainable lifestyle” in order to mitigate the impact of global warming. In their report *Planning for Change*, the United Nations Environment Program [49] stated that “major environmental concerns such as climate change can be traced to the demands put on nature by contemporary consumer society” (p. 14) and urged consumers to “make governments and businesses stand up and take notice through their shopping behavior” (p. 29). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [25] also reported that “changes in lifestyles have led to more individualized buying patterns” (p. 12); therefore, a shift in the structure of consumption toward more sustainability is required.

Both the UN and OECD issued guidelines on “good policies” to encourage their member countries to promote sustainable consumption, such as setting up energy efficient standards and mandatory labels, providing subsidies to improve energy efficiency, and developing communication campaigns to advocate eco-friendly individual choices [26]. Following this trend, Taiwan’s President Ma Ying-Jeou, in his 2008 inaugural address, vowed that his government would combat the problems of global warming. Soon after he came to office, the government announced the “Energy Saving, Carbon Reduction” policy (ESCR), urging Taiwanese

citizens to act immediately to change habits and achieve sustainability. Since then, the ESCR has become a major guideline for the establishment of many regulations in Taiwan.

However, the notion that policy interventions can encourage individual lifestyle changes solely through altering people’s attitudes and choices has been widely criticized. Owens [30] argued that policy makers often assume that people would be willing to change their behaviors should they have more information about, and a clearer understanding of, environmental risks. These policies are situated in theories that regard consumption as a matter of individual choice, but ignore how consumers’ choices are affected by structural factors in society [37], such as culture, class, and gender. Moreover, policies that respond to climate change have been overtly focused on scientific and economic solutions rather than on the human and gender dimensions [44]. Scholars have argued that the dimension of gender has been invisible or made silent in climate-change related policies [51,14,23]. Hemmati and Röhr [14] indicated that gender aspects are rarely addressed in climate change policy at both the national and international levels. MacGregor [22] further stated that any attempt to tackle climate change that excludes a gender analysis is insufficient, unjust, and therefore unsustainable. Both politicians and academics must pay more attention to gender in debates on climate change.

Considering social justice and the gendered dimensions of climate change policies, this study uses a practice-based theoretical approach to investigate how people’s everyday actions are affected by sustainable consumption policies from an Eastern-Asian context. Using the ESCR in Taiwan as a case study, the following

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2016.03.005>  
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questions are explored: First, does the policy underestimate the complexity of everyday practices, and if so how? Second, does the policy bring any unexpected consequences in terms of gender inequality? I begin the remainder of this paper with a discussion of sustainable policies and social justice to elaborate how daily practices are influenced by various resources, constraints, and material conditions. Subsequently, an investigation of the ESCR's policies, based on empirical evidence, is introduced. I argue that the policies, without considering differences in social roles, may have unexpectedly caused gender inequality. This study also advocates practicing procedural justice in the form of women's participation in policy-making processes, in order to avoid the wider gender inequalities caused by environmental policies.

## 2. Green practices and gender justice

As briefly stated previously, international organizations such as the UN and OECD encourage their members to promote sustainable consumption with measures that usually involve scientific persuasion and the provision of economic incentives. These conventional measures are based on expectations that routines would be changed once people are fully educated and informed. However, many scholars (e.g., Refs. [30,24,37,18]) have argued that the types of policies commonly underestimate the complexities of consumption, and that individuals could not immediately change their lifestyles even if the benefits of mitigating global warming were fully recognized.

In her analysis of sustainable consumption policies, Shove [43] indicated that governments often conceptualize consumers as, first, decision-makers who can exercise environmental choices, and second, citizens who have influences on the range of environmental options offered to them. Since research has shown that individual choices are constrained by social, institutional, and cultural factors, Shove [43] argued that, rather than seeing consumers as individual decision-makers, they should be understood as "practitioners." Meanwhile, having explored the driving forces behind the growth of consumption from economic, socio-psychological, historical, and social-technological explanations, Ropke [35] acknowledged that "consumption is woven into everyday life" (p. 403), and that "much of our consumption is dependent on systems that appear as conditions of everyday life" (p. 416). She further suggested that a practice theory approach that bridges the structure-actor dualism can facilitate an analysis of the interwoven relationships among systems and consumption activities [36]. Redefining consumers as practitioners draws attention to doing and using, rather than to only buying and putting on display. This redefinition can facilitate understanding people's routines and expectations in which systems of social and cultural order are revealed.

Both Shove [43] and Ropke [36] situated their arguments within theories of practice. Since the 1970s, practice theories have attracted growing interest in social theory. Reckwitz [33] summarized a useful definition for the concept of "practice", drawing on the work of several authors including Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Charles Taylor, and Theodore Shatzki: "a practice is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another, including forms of bodily and mental activities, things and their use, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (p. 249). In other words, to understand consumers as practitioners is to investigate the consumers' routinized activities and how their state of "normal" has been attained. This suggests that practices should be considered seriously and that the complexities of how a way of life can become a sustained "style" should not be underestimated.

In viewing consumers as practitioners, the linkages between practices and structures are acknowledged. Pierre Bourdieu [1] was

one of the first sociologists to explicitly present a theory of practice. He stated that practices are related to not only the actor's body and mind but also to the structure in which she or he is normally located. The "habitus" of a person that is, her or his system of dispositions—is influenced by her or his "habitat" and positions in society, including group membership, class, gender, and occupation. The relationship between practice and habitus is like "history turned into nature" [1,p. 78], with lifestyles being the systematic products of habitus. Bourdieu argued that habitus is defined by two capacities: "the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e. the space of lifestyles, is constituted" [2,p. 170]. Inspired by Bourdieu, Southerton et al. [45] stressed that research on sustainable consumption should focus on social constraints, normative regulation, and the routine aspects of ordinary or mundane forms of consumption. To this end, they suggest that an analysis of social practices allows these elements of consumption to be more thoroughly explored.

Recent research has revealed that everyday social practices, and the use of resources such as energy, transportation, and food, are highly gender differentiated. For example, Rätty and Carlsson-Kanyama [32] studied single households in Germany, Sweden, Norway, and Greece and concluded that women travel shorter distances, use more fuel-efficient vehicles, and eat less meat than men do. However, women tend to consume more energy than men do in categories including food, hygiene, household effects, and health. Lee et al. [20] used survey data to examine gender differences in energy consumption in Taiwan and revealed that households with more female than male members usually use less energy. The researchers compared energy usage between single male and single female households and determined that the latter tend to use less energy for heating, air conditioning, lighting, refrigeration, washing dishes, laundry, entertainment, and communication, but consume more energy for heating water, cooking, and drying clothes.

The differences in energy consumption between men and women are related to women's habitus and their social and personal identities as caregivers of families. The dominant notion of appropriate femininity is motherhood. This reveals the social, historical, and geographical construction of gender identities in the context of hegemonic heterosexuality, which affects policy making and individuals' daily lives. For example, many child focussed policies are rooted in the understanding of 'good' mothering as the key to a child's successful development [50], and women have to adopt certain everyday practices in respond to these social expectations. Laurie et al. [21] urged the need to think about how gender discourses differ between countries and places, work and domestic spaces, and across cultures. Also, the ideology of good mothering may evolve with changing social, political, economic and global conditions. In terms of globally advocated sustainable consumption campaigns, research has shown that many of the policy measures increase women's burdens and add new standards for good mothering.

For example, German feminist scholars, including Schultz [39], have argued that policies promoting fewer individual vehicles, healthy eating, and reducing waste have actually increased women's workload and feminized responsibility for the environment (cited in Ref. [51]). Unlike a typical male breadwinner who goes to work in the morning and returns in the evening, a caregiver's mobility patterns require traveling back and forth among certain sites, such as schools, supermarkets, sports fields, friends' homes, and workplaces. However, the design of public transportation usually does not coincide with the needs of the latter. In the food sector, it is often overlooked that the advocacy of a sustainable food culture relies on women's unpaid labour because usually

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