

Mired: Women in the Oil Zones

Maryse Helbert

The research takes an innovative ecofeminist approach to analyze the unequal distribution of benefits and risks in oil extraction across geographic, economic, security and environmental spaces, and particularly along gendered lines. I use three oil zones, termed “zones of sacrifice”—in Nigeria, Venezuela, and the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline—to show how these zones have been economically, politically, socially, and environmentally disrupted by the production of oil for a world addicted to it. In these zones of sacrifice, women bear the largest share of the burden of these disruptions.

The primary purpose of the book is to examine and conceptualize the gender implications of oil extraction in developing countries, addressing the following key questions:

1. What are the impacts of oil extraction projects on women in oil-rich countries?
2. How can these impacts be theoretically explained?
3. How can negative impacts be reduced?

Oil extraction projects in Nigeria and Venezuela serve as important illustrative cases in the development of a response to the first two questions above, as these two countries have taken different economic pathways—private ownership structures for Nigeria and collective ownership structures for Venezuela—to exploit oil. The Chad-Cameroon Pipeline illustrative case, while also shedding light on the first two questions, goes deeper into an examination of governance reforms, and hence provides important insights with regard to the third question above.

In this book, ecofeminism provides a critical conceptual umbrella connecting the oppression of women and the exploitation of nonhuman nature, and highlighting the connection between different—and unjustified—hierarchies. This approach demonstrates how the negative impacts on women living in oil-rich countries arise from the intersection of a matrix of oppressive structures, running not only along axes of class, race, ethnicity, and space, but also gender and nature. The book seeks to show how an ecofeminist framework is able to highlight and unpack the complex matrix of oppressive structures that systematically discriminate against women in these oil zones. In effect, the well-being of this particular constituency in the oil zones is sacrificed to keep the oil flowing.

There is a significant amount of research and literature developing the theory of the “oil curse”: an observed “paradox of plenty” whereby the substantial level of oil wealth associated with oil-rich countries is frequently accompanied by high levels of poverty among the general population. These conceptual accounts do not analyze the gendered impacts of the oil curse, nor do they analyze the long-term political, economic, social, and environmental impacts of a world addicted to oil. Uncovering the gendered habits of hydrocarbon extraction is particularly significant for the broader debate of environmental justice. This book will provide a conceptual framework to better understand the challenges of natural resource extraction and management more broadly, and so help guide the transformations in environment and society that accompany such projects with a view to securing environmental justice.