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How to cite:

Dolata, Petra. "Women and Energy in the Ruhr Area of West Germany, 1950s–1980s." In: "Women and Energy," edited by Abigail Harrison Moore and Ruth Sandwell, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2020, no. 1, 51–55. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9071.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry of Education and Research

Deutsches Museum

LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN

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Women and Energy in the Ruhr Area of West Germany, 1950s–1980s

Growing up in the Ruhr area, I remember well how upset I was to learn upon moving into my own first rented apartment that I was expected to clean the communal hallway twice a week when it was my turn. There was a strict rotation with my other two older female neighbours, who lived on the same floor. So, every third week I was expected to clean the stairs and landing as well as the stairs down to the cellar. And not just sweeping the floor but, as my neighbours insisted, mopping it with a wet cloth, was the only acceptable way to do so. Not just once a week but twice, Wednesdays and Saturdays. Even to a German who was always very proud of how neat her room was, this seemed rather excessive, especially when none of us received many visitors who may have brought more than the average kind of dirt from the street into the hallway.

This happened in Bochum-Gerthe, on the outskirts of the city of Bochum in the heart of the industrial coal and steel region, in the mid-1990s. There used to be a coal mine in Bochum-Gerthe called Zeche Lothringen, but it closed in 1957. I myself had grown up in another Ruhr city where the coal mine had closed in 1972. Only later I learned that what these elderly women were introducing me to was one of the many peculiar remnants of living in a region defined by coal mining. Until higher smokestacks dispersed the fine coal dust all over Germany in the 1970s, thousands of housewives in the Ruhr area had to fight the daily battle against the fine black dust that would settle on washing hanging outside to dry, on windows, sills, and stairs. My mum told me that windows were cleaned every week and so were the white starched drapes that were so neatly pleated, unlike anywhere else in West Germany, which were a centrepiece of resistance against the most visible impact of an energy production system based on coal. This obsession with *strahlend weiß* (spotlessly white) and clean houses certainly still held sway over my female neighbours, who were in their late 60s. Women living in the Ruhr area after 1945, most of whom were miner's wives working at home, constantly had to deal with the effects of air pollution. For some, the constant cleaning was an attempt to challenge the image of the Ruhr area as dirty, but others were adamant that this was a silent protest against the air pollution. According to photographer Rudolf Holtappel, they even went as far as wearing white blouses on purpose to highlight the contrast between the spotless white garment and their polluted surroundings.

This highlights the very ambiguity of women's energy agency in the Ruhr region after 1945. Most of the houses that witnessed the women's daily battle against dirt and dust also accommodated those who created the black dust in the first place, coal miners. These coal miners, husbands to the women at the centre of my story, also earned the money that paid for renting, and later even owning little houses, and for the education of their children that enabled their upward social mobility. Women in the 1950s and 1960s were caught between demanding cleaner air for their children and supporting their husbands' livelihoods as coal miners. As has often been the case, women's roles were once again defined through being mothers and wives—worried about their children's health and their husband's job security. But what about women's (unpaid) work in these stories? How did women support and endorse the coal industry and how did they reject it? What was their involvement in protesting against mine closures one day and against the environmental impacts of coal mining the next day? What about their political engagement beyond their role as mother and wife? How did they position themselves within the coal-dominated energy system of post-war West Germany? And what does all this tell us about human agency in coming energy transitions?

Answering these questions and understanding the role of women in the coal mining region of West Germany lies at the heart of my contribution. It helps me combine my research interest as an energy historian focusing on the history of energy transitions with my personal background growing up in the coal-mining Ruhr region of West Germany in the 1980s. It speaks to my frustration with the fact that women's historical involvement in energy systems and transitions is either told as separate stories of consumption (mainly in the household) or subsumed under some collective historical experience, for example of the working class or Western consumer societies. It is informed by my understanding that individual life stories of the past may be helpful in creating empathy and critical engagement with current discussions about our energy futures, facilitating creative responses to today's energy challenges. It is particularly driven by the objective of acknowledging women's agency in energy transitions and to highlight stories of resilience. The aim is to uncover the highly normative discussions surrounding the history of women and energy by addressing women's ambivalent roles as both victims and perpetrators of the fossil fuel-based energy systems that endanger the survival of our planet. Thus, while I will make women more visible, I will also embrace the ambivalence these women exhibited as they endorsed and actively supported an energy system based on coal while openly rejecting aspects of it such as air pollution. Only if we understand the full spectrum of human

agency in energy systems—relating to both energy consumption *and* production—will we be able to capture the complex human experience of energy systems past and present.

I look at the Ruhr region from the 1950s to the 1980s to understand how the structural changes affecting coal production were noticed, experienced, and narrated by women. I want to understand how these women, through their words and actions, actively participated in, supported, and rejected this coal-based energy system. In order to do so, I am analysing letters to newspapers and governments (at the municipal, regional, and federal levels), personal narratives such as autobiographies and memoirs, photographs, newspaper coverage, promotional publications, and oral histories that were gathered as "histories from below." For example, I am consulting the LUSIR oral history archives *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930–1960* (Life stories and social culture in the Ruhr region 1930–1960). This foundational project was started by Lutz Niethammer in 1980 as one of the first large-scale oral history projects in West Germany and aimed at documenting the experience of living in Nazi Germany and post-World War II West Germany. Another useful oral history source is the project *Digitaler Gedächtnisspeicher—Menschen im Bergbau* (Digital memory storage—people in coal mining)[1] conducted by the Stiftung Geschichte des Ruhrgebiets and Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum. Methodologically, my contribution borrows heavily from both oral history and *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history), which is a kind of microhistory from below, founded by German historians Alf Lüdtke and Hans Medick in the 1980s.

Through these sources, we can see how some women welcomed more convenient heating and cooking arrangements via district heating or natural gas, which directly competed with and thus undermined the domestic and household demand for coal. In an effort to counteract such competition by rivaling fuels, coal companies started targeting women in their advertisements for coal-burning stoves, which were presented as modern, clean, economical, and easy to handle. Coal miners' homes were not exclusively heated by house coal (*Deputatskohle*), which was delivered as part of the miners' salary, but also by old-fashioned wood-fired stoves and brand new central heating. We encounter women who fought against pollution caused by coal mining from the 1950s onwards. They wrote letters to local newspapers and members of the federal and regional parliaments. They were particularly worried about their children, whose health was found to be adversely

1 "Menschen im Bergbau," Stiftung Geschichte des Ruhrgebiets and Deutsches Bergbau Museum Bochum, 2020, http://menschen-im-bergbau.de.

impacted. For example, according to a 1959 study, children in the Ruhr region were on average smaller and weighed less than their peers elsewhere in West Germany. When the first mine closures led to massive protests by coal miners in the late 1950s and early 1960s, women accompanied their men on protest marches and stood behind them at pit vigils. Later in the 1970s and 1980s, they organised their own protests, including sit-ins in front of the Chancellery in Bonn. When their husbands lost their coal mining jobs, some women, who had spent a lot of time alone at home taking care of the children and the household, found that they had to share their authority in the home with their unemployed husbands. And starting in the 1960s, the region attracted more service industries, as well as textile and electronics plants, which made it easier for these women to find jobs and reverse roles with men. Listening to the stories of these women and the changes they lived through as the region was transformed—from being defined by coal to looking a lot more like the rest of West Germany—highlights the complexity and ambivalence of human experience in transitioning energy systems. It also reminds us of the importance of understanding the specific experiences and impacts that women had during these transitions.

Further Reading

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