

Brief on Gender and Energy

Access to energy is a critical factor for poverty alleviation, improvements in health and education, environmental sustainability, and the empowerment of women. Energy services such as lighting, cooking, heating and cooling, water pumping, refrigeration, transportation, and communications are essential for economic and social development. However, gender inequities continue to pervade the energy sector. Globally, women spend an average of three hours per day on fuel and water transportation, which is on average three times as much time as men spend. Consequently, women and children suffer from higher levels of lung and eye disease because they spend more time inside the house exposed to indoor air pollutants and fuel emissions, which is both a major public health and an environmental issue. Also, energy-related institutions have significantly fewer female professionals at all levels, as women are less likely to receive training due to social misconceptions, family responsibilities, and cultural constraints.

The availability of energy services affects men and women differently, depending on the energy applications with which they are involved. Where social traditions dictate that men and women have distinct roles and responsibilities based on their gender, neglecting these differences can lead to policies and projects that do not improve the lives of women (especially those in poor communities) and may even make their lives more difficult by reinforcing women's low status, economic disadvantages, poor health and lack of power. Energy priorities identified by women include clean fuels for cooking, heating and productive uses; motorised equipment for grinding, pumping, agriculture, and transportation; and electricity for lights, appliances, communications and computers.

The particular needs of women with respect to improved access to energy are rarely taken into account in national policies and projects. Energy agencies tend to focus primarily on increasing fossil fuel supplies and expanding electrical distribution grids for industrial and urban expansion. While many energy managers are male engineers with primarily technical expertise, a transition to more sustainable energy sources will require decision-makers to also consider social concerns, including the gender-differentiated needs and impacts of proposed sustainable energy initiatives.

Unfortunately, most policy debate and legislative frameworks have not been gender-sensitive. A major problem perpetuated by energy policy today is the identification of women as targets instead of actors. Women continue to be seen as victims, when their capacities for entrepreneurship, innovation, and active participation are limitless within the realm of energy policy-making, decision-making, and program implementation. To address the theme of gender and energy, it is necessary to understand how social inequalities affect energy use, management and access.

For more information:

- IUCN Fact Sheet on Energy:

http://generoyambiente.org/admin/admin_biblioteca/documentos/Energy.pdf

- The International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy (ENERGIA): www.energia.org

