

Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women through Energy Accessibility

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Abstract

Energy is an essential component of daily life. Absence of adequate energy can hugely and harmfully affect every society across the world. It is deeply influence people's lives and is an engine for social development and economic growth. Over the centuries, energy has helped to transform societies and has underpinned human development. Energy contributes to fulfilling the most basic human needs, including nutrition, warmth, and light. It is essential to life in the 21st century. Women's empowerment is closely linked to capable energy solutions. Women in developing countries can benefit significantly from improved access to energy through cleaner, more efficient stoves and fuels, as well as motorized equipment for food processing, water pumping, lighting, communications and business enterprises. A focus on promoting women's economic empowerment through improved energy access makes good economic sense. Energy, by allowing progress to be made in terms of health, education and poverty, gives women more chance of having the opportunities traditionally reserved for men. In this way, it allows the living conditions of women to be improved. Empowering women and girls is necessary for energy development and energy security. Gender perspectives need to be incorporated into energy projects, policy and planning in order to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. Energy policies need to be carefully designed in ways that benefit both women and men. This paper discussed about the social and economic empowerment of women through energy accessibility and the paper is totally based on secondary data which is drawn from various sources.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Socio-economic Development, Health, Energy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Energy deeply influences people's lives and is an engine for social development and economic growth. Over the centuries, energy has helped to transform societies and has underpinned human development. Energy contributes to fulfilling the most basic human needs, including nutrition, warmth, and light. In many developing countries, energy is the primary responsibility of women (especially in rural communities), where most energy is derived from traditional biomass fuels such as wood, charcoal and agricultural wastes. Energy is not an end in itself but a means of satisfying needs. People do not need energy but the services that energy provides in helping to meet needs such as lighting, cooking, space heating or cooling, water pumping, information, and entertainment. This study, therefore, seeks to reveal the value of engaging women actively in the energy provisioning process, such that each aspect of the role played by them not only has a favorable impact on women's empowerment socially and economically but also enables the overall intervention to be more effective and far reaching.

Energy is a fundamental component of daily life. Absence of sufficient energy can drastically and adversely affect every society across the world. Most of the people without access to modern energy are poor. Lack of energy access affects all aspects of life, from childcare to subsistence agriculture and to earning a living. Without energy services, it is very difficult for people to move out of poverty and establish more viable and resilient livelihoods. Access to modern energy services (e.g. clean cooking fuels and stoves, advanced biomass cooking stoves and biogas systems) plays a key role in facilitating access to clean water, sanitation and health care.

Electricity is still a luxury for many rural women and men, and modern energy services are far from accessible. This problem is more pronounced in the informal sector, which tends to include more poor women, as biomass is the main source of fuel. Since women's energy contributions are largely in the informal sector and women are generally constrained in their roles in the social, economic, and political spheres, women are limited in their power and participation in making decisions regarding the development and implementation of energy policies, mechanisms and investments. As a result, women's energy priorities, including their needs for cleaner, more efficient fuels and equipment for household and productive uses, are rarely considered in decisions made in the energy sector. There is a need to draw on both women's and men's perspectives, and needs, to inform energy strategies, and secure women's participation in all stages of decision-making to support their specific needs.

2. ENERGY ACCESS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Energy is necessary to life in the 21st century. Development is not possible without access to energy and energy is vital for women's development in terms of reducing their time burden for collecting firewood used in cooking and heating, supporting livelihoods activities, improving health and wellbeing, and providing opportunities for enterprise and capacity-building. Developing renewable, non-emission-generating and affordable energy sources and cooking solutions will make important contributions to addressing climate change and decreasing carbon emissions.

A quarter of humanity today lives without access to any electricity and almost one-half still depends on solid fuels such as unprocessed biomass, coal, or charcoal for its thermal needs. These people continue to suffer a multitude of impacts detrimental to their welfare. Most people live in

rural villages and urban slums in developing nations. Access to affordable modern energy carriers is a necessary and step toward alleviating poverty and enabling the expansion of local economies. Accesses to reliable, efficient, affordable, and safe energy carriers can directly affect productivity, income, and health, and can enhance gender equity, education and access to other infrastructure services.

3. ENERGY AS A KEY VARIABLE IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERING WOMEN

Women's empowerment is closely linked to efficient energy solutions. Women in developing countries can benefit significantly from improved access to energy through cleaner, more efficient stoves and fuels, as well as motorized equipment for food processing, water pumping, lighting, communications and business enterprises. Energy technologies reduce the drudgery involved in traditional household work, increase family education and literacy rates, and improve health by reducing the health risks associated with inefficient energy sources. Improved energy options for lighting, efficient stoves, electrical equipment and communication devices allow women to become more successful in their existing businesses and expand into new activities.

Many rural women spend up to three hours a day gathering fuel and carrying heavy loads, this burden leaves them with little time for productive activities or leisure, can put women and girls at risk of long-term health problems and increases their vulnerability to physical or sexual violence. In addition, spending long hours indoors with traditional wood burning stoves can result in health hazards such as lung disease and eye infections for women and children. The provision of clean cook stoves can mitigate these negative impacts while promoting women's empowerment, as the time that would have been used to collect fuel can now be used for other productive and economic activities

A focus on promoting women's economic empowerment through improved energy access makes good economic sense. Emphasizing women's energy needs will alleviate the time burden women face from the use of inefficient energy sources, and increase economic benefits - like increasing profits from home businesses by providing appropriate energy sources. The large amount of time which women spend collecting fuel wood (and carrying water) deprives them of educational and economic opportunities. Improved fuels and equipment and access to electricity provide new opportunities for income generation, positively affecting a woman and her family, as well as national economic growth.

The gender division of household tasks and reproductive activities around cooking and food production means that women are often the primary users of household energy and are, therefore, often the most adversely affected by the lack of access to clean, affordable and sustainable energy. The effects of advancing women's economic empowerment through access to energy are widespread and diverse, result in positive impacts on social and economic development and human security. Women are caretakers of resources, their families and their communities. Access to clean and affordable modern energy is critical to fostering sustainable development, realizing human rights and achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While there have been efforts to address energy needs in developing countries by the global community, energy needs as related to women have been overlooked. Women are lagging behind their male counterparts in most indicators of socio-economic growth. Access to efficient energy is an essential element of economic development where women remain disproportionately affected.

4. BENEFITS TO IMPROVING WOMEN'S ENERGY ACCESS

4.1 Income Generation

Women's employment and entrepreneurship lead to greater income generation and wealth creation, slowing down population growth, and improving the social status of women at home and in their communities. Providing electricity and mechanical power for income-generating activities and reliable supply to households eases women's household burdens and increases their incomes (**Energia 2011**). When households are able to use electricity for lighting, this affects the whole family by effectively extending the day. For women, this is usually a very positive development.

Many women around the world are short of time and a longer day helps to ease the constraints of combining housework and childcare, roles that are typically assigned to women along with, in some cases, income generating or farm activities. Lighting has been shown to help women extend their workdays, thereby enabling them to increase their incomes. Since many women provide catering services from their homes or operate as street food vendors, the use of more efficient stoves would contribute to making these businesses more profitable.

4.2 Benefits to Families and Communities

Increases in women's incomes are frequently linked with higher levels of spending on families and communities – as compared to similar increases in the incomes of men. This will make women to have more investments in children's education, health and nutrition, and long-term economic growth. Electric lighting and a longer day can mean that women are more likely to read or have more time for social work. There are other benefits from using electric lighting rather than kerosene lamps. These come in the form of reduced indoor pollution and lower risk of burns and also less cleaning work as there is no soot to dirty clothes and linen. The longer day leads to improved school performance, as children are able to study for longer. This is especially beneficial to girls, as in some situations they are required to do household chores once they return from school while the boys do homework, using most of the kerosene.

Access to cleaner cooking methods is beneficial for the whole family. However, it is particularly beneficial for women and children who, because of their roles in the family, typically suffer more from the effects of cooking on open fires. Cleaner cooking can come in the form of more efficient stoves using less biomass; electric cooking appliances; using liquid petroleum gas and biogas. Energy provides clean water, sanitation and health care will save women and girls time in fetching water and ease their household cleaning and care responsibilities. It provides reliable and efficient lighting, which has both safety and an education benefits—it contributes to girls' education by allowing them to do schoolwork after their domestic chores are finished and greatly increases safety in public spaces.

4.3 Increased Employment

Access to means of training and information, education of the young female generation, the fact that women have an income and can work outside the household provokes a change in mentality and changes the image and treatment of women. Women can also make significant new economic contributions in the energy sector as actors in the energy value chain, e.g. as stove producers, briquette makers, masons constructing biogas systems, and as promoters and marketers of

efficient energy technologies. The use of cleaner cooking technologies has very positive impacts for women's health, which in turn results in time and money savings. Increased fuel efficiency also means less of a burden in collecting wood, a task often allotted to women. Benefits of cleaner and more efficient energy sources for women and girls include.

Access to good quality light can make performing childcare and household chores, tasks still typically assigned to women, easier. Gender roles can be challenged by women starting paid employment, especially if this is work not typically done by women. Expanding women and girls' access to education and information through increased schooling and access to media contributes significantly to female empowerment, and is arguably one of the most important outcomes of gaining access to electricity.

5. CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

Women play an important role in different sectors. They are not only involved in doing the basic household chores but also major contributors in the agrarian sector. Thus any scarcity in the water and energy sectors has direct implications on their financial, physical and social well-being. When women gain access to clean and affordable energy services, they gain tremendously. Their health improves. Children are able to study, and they get more and more opportunities to earn income. When health clinics and primary health services are improved through providing electricity, and other energies, maternal and childbirth can be dealt with better way and refrigeration of vaccines and medicines can be easily enabled. When women earn an income, for example, they use the major part of it benefit of their families, communities and economies.

Energy is key to development, poverty alleviation and achieving the MDGs. Access to better energy services can also improve women's socio-economic status, reducing the time and effort involved in household chores, giving them time to avail themselves of other social services (e.g. education), and improving their health conditions. The introduction of cleaner, more efficient and renewable sources of energy can also bring new training, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for women and men.

Women are keys to the development challenge. Throughout the developing world, women are at a disadvantage at the household, community, and societal levels. Within the household, women have less access to and control over resources and limited influence over household decisions. Beyond the household, women have limited access to communal resources. They are under-represented in public decision-making bodies. They have limited bargaining power in markets (such as the labor market) and often lack opportunities to improve their socio-economic position. Therefore, efforts should be made to reduce gender inequality on multiple fronts.

Empowering women and girls is necessary for energy development and energy security. Gender perspectives need to be incorporated into energy projects, policy and planning in order to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability. Energy policies need to be carefully designed in ways that benefit both women and men. All concerned such as governments, civil society, the donor community, the private sector and individuals should seek to understand the gender-differentiated needs and responsibilities of men and women in order to make gender-aware policy and programming decisions and give women greater voice in decision-making. It, therefore, becomes imperative to spread awareness among them regarding the effective management of food, water and energy systems. Government should induce policy interventions

that take into consideration the difficulties they face at different levels, and provide solutions to enable access to women. Conventional energy policies have tended to focus on energy supply, with little attention to the social issues relating to energy. Gender blind energy policies miss vital opportunities to ensure projects draw on women's vital local knowledge and their influencing capacity within households and communities.

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