WHY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO GENDER IN ELECTRIFICATION PROGRAMMES?

Why, one might ask, should one pay special attention to gender when planning for electrification in poor areas of the world? Surely it is the household as a whole that gets the electricity, so everyone benefits: men, women and children?

Focusing on women for efficiency and for empowerment

Recent research indicates that looking at electricity needs and electricity provision through 'gendered spectacles' (Levy, 1992) is of particular importance when poverty alleviation is one of the programme's aims (Cecelski 1998,2000). Poverty has a gendered face and shortage of energy is intimately tied up with poverty. Whether the programme deals with grid extension or provision of decentralized forms, for example by use of new and renewable energy technologies, there is a need to recognize that not everyone in a community has the same needs and priorities, the same problems or the same possibilities for participation. Simply in terms of ensuring that the programme makes the most efficient use of its own resources, it makes sense to recognize these differences so that strategies can be devised to meet as many needs as possible (Skutsch 1998).

In most places women form the majority of the poor. Apart from the fact that they earn lower wages than men when formally employed, women do not always have much say over 'family' financial resources, although they often contribute substantially to these though their labour, in addition to performing household work which has no financial reward. Moreover the number of female-headed households is increasing everywhere and these tend to be among the poorest households in any community. As with any intervention, however well intentioned, there is a risk that electrification increases social inequalities, giving access to a broad range of opportunities to those who can afford to connect and leaving the others still further behind (Cecelski 2000). Apart from the social undesirability of this, it means that the potential for economic and personal development of a section of the population is being wasted.

Further there is the more general issue of women's empowerment, an issue which is espoused by many donors, NGOs both local and international, and women's organizations (Skutsch 1998). Electricity is one of many things that may contribute to the gradual changing of gender relations, freeing women in various ways to enable them to participate more actively in economic, social and political life.

A gendered understanding of energy needs

(1) Women's household energy needs

When women's energy needs are considered, cooking energy is often cited as the central and most problematic, and indeed the use of biomass fuels is in many places not only very burdensome in terms of time and energy used in gathering it, but also in terms of health effects. While electricity is not likely to be able to replace biomass cooking fuels on a large scale (far more kilowatts are needed for cooking than for lighting, and electricity can rarely compete in price with the biomass alternative) this

does not mean that it has no potential in the kitchen even in poor rural settings. Low cost, low wattage rice cookers for example are sweeping SE Asia and appliances such as fans to increase the efficiency of woodfires are on sale in China (Cecelski 2000). Refrigeration can to a certain extent rationalize food preparation too. But women's needs for modern energy do not stop at the kitchen door. Even more important in terms of their standard household activities could be electrical pumps for domestic water supply, to reduce women's manual labour in hand pumping or hauling, and electric grinding mills to replace hand pounding of grains and of oil seeds, both back-breaking activities carried out by many women daily (Skutsch 1994). The success of the Mali platforms in providing decentralised electricity for some such activities is a case in point (Burns and Coche 2000). Popularity of the mechanization of such tasks (by electrification or otherwise) is undoubted: studies in East Africa show that women prefer to walk 10 km, or pay the bus fare, to carry a sack of grain to a mill rather than pound it themselves at home (McCall 1987). Irons and blenders are two obvious gadgets to ease some of the more tedious tasks within the household (though these last might not be priority investments for poorer women). To the extent that any one of these technologies frees women from unnecessary labour, however, it presents an opportunity for development. Ilahi and Grimard (cited in Ilahi, 2000) for example have shown that time taken by women to collect water is negatively related to income earning activities.

(2) Non-traditional energy needs at home

Then there are the non-traditional activities that women may take up when electricity is present in the household, which may change their lives, and their social position within the household. It is often said that electric light allows children to study harder and do their homework in the evenings, and equally electric light may enable women to participate in literacy or other educational or social programmes, not least because street lighting has been shown to greatly increase their safety and may make going out alone at night possible for the very first time (Clancy 2000). Here one could also mention the benefits of electrification of community services such as clinics which, although of course used by men, women and children alike, perhaps impact most on women who are the main carers of the sick.

Moreover access to TV can have enormous benefit to women. A recent study in Tunisia (Chaieb, Aissa and Ounalli, 2001) showed that the installation of TV in their homes meant that women became much more aware of political events of the day, and knew much more about what was going on in the world, thus giving them confidence to speak on such matters as well as making them more fashion conscious and open to new ideas in general (including health and nutrition issues). The sense of being tied into the greater world is a liberating one and should not be underestimated. Naturally men also benefit from this, but 'current affairs' has traditionally been a topic of conversation among men from which women tended to be excluded.

(3) Energy for women's income generation

Electricity can also bring women opportunities to start income earning activities without taking them out of the house[1] (although it can also provide the key to such activities as full time occupations outside the home too). In the Tunisian study cited above, lighting made weaving in the evenings possible and many girls preferred to stay in the village and earn a living using a sewing machine than going to the city to work as maids. There has been successful conversion of women's bakeries to solar power in Mexico increasing their competitiveness (Stone, 1998). Hairdressers establishments often spring up where electricity is introduced and a myriad of small scale enterprises in food processing and computer based services can follow (Clancy and Redeby 2000; Huque 1999). Small enterprise opportunities are of course available for men as well as women, although their choice of enterprise may be different.

(4) Women as energy entrepreneurs

A new consideration is the role of women as energy entrepreneurs (Batliwala and Reddy 1996). Since electricity provision is in general tending towards more decentralization and more privatization, there are economic opportunities opening up for small scale enterprises not only in electricity production itself but also in allied services, such as construction of connections, wiring of buildings, maintenance, appliance repairs etc. as well as administration of supply and payments. These have traditionally been men's professions but there is no inherent reason why this should remain so. In Vietnam a women's NGO trained women to install and maintain solar home systems with great success (Everts and Schulte 1997). While this may not be appropriate or desired in every community, women's needs for income generating activities could in some cases be met by employment in this field and it should therefore not be forgotten.

A gendered approach to electricity provision

While the literature, reviewed briefly above, is clear that women's priority energy needs may be different from men's, there is less information or written experience on how to deal with this in the practice of setting up and running electrification programmes, particularly if these are aimed not at women only, but rather wish to ensure that women's needs are explicitly catered for as part of the bigger picture (Dhanapala 1998). Some guidelines have been developed for the application of standard gender analytic tools to rural energy planning situations (Skutsch 1997), but these cover all types of energy, particularly biomass energy, and are not specific for electricity. There are guidelines for inclusion of gender issues in other sectors, such as water (Dayal, van Wijk and Mukherjee n.d), but these cannot be applied directly to electricity either.

---

[1] It is sometimes said that women have a hard enough time with their current activities and 'we should not be pushing them to work all evening to earn income, too'. Though meant well, such comments are fundamentally flawed and patronising. In most instances women make their own choice about starting income earning projects and do so because they want money for purposes which they select themselves. In the few places where women are forced by their menfolk to work all hours of day and night and hand over the cash at the end, electricity would probably not make any difference to such exploitation.

What is important from a gender perspective is to understand that if women are to be able to take advantage of the full range of benefits of electricity supply, thought has to be given to how to ensure that they are able to access it. Women, as well as men, need to be consulted on such mundane questions as where the sockets are to be placed in the house, as well as what sort of training could be provided and what sort of credit facilities might be necessary for them to start such small enterprises, since women's views on these matters are likely to be different from men's.

The first step is to recognize and acknowledge at a conceptual level that gender differences do matter in the provision of electricity.

The second step is to gather gender disaggregated data in the communities in which the programme is to take place to substantiate these differences. In every setting there will be different realities, the division of domains between men and women will be different, tradition as regards activities will be different. One should not *assume* the nature of women's energy needs and dreams, their constraints and their potential, but direct local research towards finding out what these are, not forgetting that women are not one homogeneous group but highly differentiated themselves by income and social group. Consultation with women and men in separate groups is obviously a major element of this (Skutsch 1997,1998).

The third step is to devise ways to reduce the barriers for women to access and use electricity for such purposes, within the household or outside. This will depend not only on the provision of the essential complementary infrastructure and a supply of potential appliances. It is well known among energy planners that the success of electrification programmes depends on ability of people to pay both for the supply and the end use equipment. This often rests on availability of credit, as well as of training and extension. To open access of these to women may require special thought and extra provision, since credit in particular is difficult for women, who lack collateral, are often illiterate and find banks intimidating, and who can repay loans only in very small installments, to obtain (Cecelski 1998, 2000; Gregory 2000).

A final step is to monitor and evaluate on-going programmes of electrification, not only as regards their general sustainability but in terms of their success in reaching out to groups easily excluded. This includes assessing whether the needs of the poorer part of the population, women in general, and poor women in particular, are being met, and whether in meeting these the programme is reaching its objectives in terms of efficiency and/or empowerment. It is essential that lessons are learned from programmes which have adopted explicit gender goals so that feedback may be used in later programmes. Such M&E activities should be based on sets of clear indicators and models which can adequately measure who is benefiting from electrification, in what way, and if not, why not. It is with this in mind that this study has been designed.

References

Batliwala, S. and A.K.N. Reddy (1996) Energy for Women and Women for Energy: A proposal for women's energy entrepreneurship. *Energia News* issue no. 1

Burns, N. and L. Coche (2000) The Multi-functional platform: Decentralised Energy for Gender-Aware Poverty Reduction in Rural West Africa. *Energia News* vol 3 no 3

Cecelski, E. (2000) Enabling Equitable Access to Rural Electrification: Current Thinking and Major Activities in Energy, Gender and Poverty. Briefing paper prepared for a Brainstorming Meeting on Asia Alternative Energy Policy and Project Development Support: Emphasis on Poverty Alleviation and Women, 26-27 January. Asia Alternative Energy Unit, World Bank, Washington DC

Cecelski, E (1998) Gender and Poverty Challenges in Scaling Up Rural Electricity Access. Paper presented at Village Power '98: Scaling up Electricity Access for Sustainable Development. 6-8 October. Washington DC

Chaieb, S, Aissa, M and Ounalli, A (2001) Methodologie et Resultats de L'Enquete (unpublished results of survey)

Clancy, J.S. (2000) Household Energy isn't all about Stoves. *Regional Energy News* Vol 6 no 1

Clancy, J.S. and Redeby, L (2000) Electricity in Households and Micro-enterprises. Energy and Environmental Technology Source Book Series, IT Publications in association with UNIFEM.

Dayal, R. Wijk, C,van, and Mukherjee, N (n.d.) Methodology for Participatory Asesessments with Communities, Institutions and Policy Makers. Linking sustainability with demand, gender and poverty. Water and Sanitation Program, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre.

Dhanapala, K. (1998) Beyond Project Boundaries: Improving Gender Impacts of Village Micro-Hydro Schemes. *Energia News* vol 2 issue 2.

Everts, S. and R. Schulte (1997) Vietnam Women's Union Promotes Solar Energy. *Energia News* Issue no 3

Huque, A.J. (1999) Empowerment of Women through Micro-enterprise Development on Renewable Energy Technology. Paper presentat at the ENERGIA workshop "Improving Women's Access to Energy: Policy, Projects and Market. University of Twente, Enschede, Netherlands. November.

Gregory, J. (2000) Coupling Rural Electrification with Micro-Credit: Linking Rural Energy Development, Poverty Alleviation and Women's Empowerment. Paper presented at the Segunda Reunion de GENES, Guatemala City, August.

Ilahi, N (2000) The Intra-household Allocation of Time and Tasks: What have we learned from the empirical experience? Development Research Group, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network, World Bank, Washington CD

Levy, C. (1992) Gender and the Environment: The Challenge of Cross-Cutting Issues in Development Policy and Planning. *Environment and Urbanisation* vol 4 no 1

McCall, M.K. (1987) Carrying Heavier Burdens but Carrying Less Weight. In Momsen, J and Townsend, J. *Geography of Gender in the Third World.* London, Methuen.

Skutsch, M.M. (1998) The Gender Issue in Energy Project Planning: Welfare, Empowerment or Efficiency? *Energy Policy* vol 26 no 12

Skutsch, M.M. (1997) Gender and Energy Training Pack. Technology and Development Group, University of Twente, Enschede, the Netherlands.

Skutsch, M.M. (1994) Integrating Women in Energy Assistance: Which way forward? *Energy for Sustainable Development,* vol 1 no 3

Stone, L (1998) Baking under the Sonoran Sun. *Energia News* vol 2 no 1