

# Sustainable Energy Services



## ENERGY SERVICES: THE GENDER DIMENSION

Over 1.6 billion people lack electricity. Almost all of them live in poverty in developing countries, in rural areas or urban slums that are not connected to the power grid and where clean fuels are either unavailable or prohibitively expensive. Two billion people rely on traditional, or biomass, fuels—such as wood, dung, charcoal and agricultural residues—for cooking and heating. For women and girls, the burdens imposed by reliance on biomass fuels define their daily routines and limit their prospects for a brighter future.

■ In poor communities in most developing countries, women and girls are responsible for collecting traditional fuels, a physically draining task that can take from 2 to 20 or more hours per week. As a result, women have less time to earn money, engage in politics or other social causes, learn to read or acquire new skills, fulfil other domestic responsibilities or simply rest. Girls are sometimes kept home from school to help gather fuel. And when environmental degradation forces them to search farther afield, women and girls become more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault as well as to injuries from carrying heavy loads long distances.

■ The use of these traditional fuels creates a massive, yet ‘invisible’, public health crisis. Poor rural women spend much of each day indoors at the cooking fire, often with their youngest children strapped to their backs. The noxious smoke from indoor fires and stoves is associated with 1.6 million deaths per year in developing countries, mostly among women and children under five. One life is lost every 20 seconds to what the World Health Organization calls ‘the killer in the kitchen’.

■ Without access to modern energy services, poor rural women must spend the bulk of each day performing the basic tasks necessary for survival—grinding grain, processing food, planting and harvesting, weaving cloth and sewing clothes, hauling containers of water that typically weigh 20 kilograms, and transporting goods (and children) on their backs or heads.

■ Modern energy services, on the other hand, liberate and empower women. They help women meet their practical, immediate needs (using electric pumps to get underground water, for example), their productive needs (using diesel generators to power home-based enterprises), and their strategic needs (using the radio or Internet access for distance learning, information-sharing, marketing, advocacy and coalition-building).



## MAKING ENERGY WORK FOR WOMEN

Men and women use energy differently in their daily lives, and the introduction of modern energy services affects them in different ways. Several areas of intervention can help to ensure that women enjoy the benefits of such services. They include access to **cleaner, convenient fuels**, such as liquid petroleum gas, for cooking and heating; **decentralized rural electricity systems**, such as diesel generators and renewable energy sources (wind, micro-hydro and photovoltaic energy to power the mechanical devices rural women need to break free of time-consuming tasks); **lighting**, which has been shown to increase women's literacy and educational levels, extend women's work day for income-generation, and make communities safer, giving women more opportunities to engage in public life; **water pumping**, which frees women and girls of water-hauling burdens; **transportation**, which gives women access to commercial, social and political opportunities, takes heavy loads of water and fuel literally off their backs, and can rush them to potentially life-saving emergency obstetric care if needed; and **information and communications technologies**, a critical tool for information-sharing, education, marketing, awareness-raising, and empowerment.

Experience has shown that the following approaches are critical to the success of energy-related projects:

- Women are the primary users of much energy equipment and therefore need to be involved in the assessment of energy needs and in the design and implementation of energy projects.
- Poor women cannot afford to buy new energy equipment unless it can be used to produce income. Consequently, projects must target the productive activities women typically undertake, including home-based, informal sector endeavours that tend to be invisible to government agencies and development organizations.
- Financial institutions and credit mechanisms need to target women and women's organizations to overcome the barriers women often face in obtaining credit.
- Energy products need to respond to user demand and

## UNDP IN ACTION: MALI

In Mali, a UNDP-supported project is making decentralized sources of energy available to rural villages at the request of local women's organizations. The goal is to provide poor rural women a substitute for the energy long provided by their own bodies, thus freeing them to earn incomes. The multifunctional platform, which is the centrepiece of the project, consists of a small diesel engine mounted on a chassis, to which a variety of equipment can be attached – grinding mills, battery chargers, vegetable or nut presses, welding machines, and the like. The platform can also support a mini-grid for lighting and electrical pumps for a small water distribution network or irrigation system.

The goal of the project is to install 450 such platforms. It is expected that more than 8,000 rural women will take part, liberating them from back-breaking labour and leading to higher incomes, economic independence, more time for education and, ultimately, a better life.

Source: UNDP, Gender & Energy for Sustainable Development: A Toolkit and Resource Guide

undergo thorough market testing to ensure that target users can afford them and actually want to use them.

At the policy level, there is a need to:

- Build awareness of the different energy needs of men and women, tackle the myth that energy is 'gender-neutral', and advocate for policies that meet women's needs.
- Increase women's participation in the male-dominated energy sector.
- Develop energy policies that deliberately address (rather than neglect) rural energy needs that relate to small-scale, informal domestic and agricultural production activities, where women tend to be concentrated.

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

*Gender and Energy for Sustainable Development: A Toolkit and Resource Guide*, prepared by UNDP in collaboration with ENERGIA, explores gender and energy issues at the project and policy levels. It is available at <http://www.undp.org/energy/>

ENERGIA is an international network whose goal is to foster the empowerment of poor women through work on energy issues. Its website has many useful resources and is available at <http://www.energia.org/about/index.html>