SEE - Clean Cooking

Thematic brief

Gender-responsive electric cooking: Insights from programmes in Nepal and Cambodia

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Gender-responsive electric cooking: Insights from programmes in Nepal and Cambodia

ENERGIA
INTERNATIONAL NETWORK ON GENDER & SUSTAINABLE ENERGY

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Key action areas for gender-responsive electric cooking programmes:

- In **awareness and communication campaigns**, target men and women with information relevant to them including gender-specific messaging using language, images and themes that resonate with them. Men must be reached out to specifically in these campaigns. Also, utilise channels that women use and are comfortable with, such as women's networks and health centres, so that they receive complete and accurate information on all aspects of the technology and pricing.

- Conduct **hands-on demonstration events** that allow women to try out and experience the technology, to ask questions and to cook dishes they are familiar with, as these are useful in building confidence in the technology.

- Ensure that all users, especially women, are **fully trained on correct usage and basic maintenance** of the electric cooking device. The best time to conduct these hands-on sessions in the community is soon after a household has purchased a device.

- Integrate electric cooking into electricity supply-strengthening initiatives. Electric cooking rollouts are likely to be more cost-effective and instil greater confidence in women if they **target areas with reliable electricity supply**.

- Ensure, and if necessary build, a **local infrastructure for the repair and maintenance** of electric cooking devices, including well trained technicians.

- Explore **mechanisms to enhance affordability** of electric cooking for low-income, often women-headed, households, such as flexible payment schemes or tariffs dedicated to electricity used for cooking.

- **Encourage women entrepreneurs and remove barriers** to their participation in the supply chain for electric cooking equipment. Intentionally reach out to them and assist them in applying to mechanisms like results-based financing (RBF).

1. Introduction

In the last decade or so, interest in electric cooking (e-cooking) has increased in many countries in the global South. As more households aspire to a modern lifestyle, the retail market for electric cooking devices is growing, especially in urban areas, even though the potential is far from being realised[i]. These include appliances such as electric kettles, rice cookers, ovens, low-wattage induction cookers, slow- and multi-cookers and microwave ovens. Electric cooking is safer and healthier than traditional forms of cooking, performs well and is cost-effective in many regions[ii]. Other drivers for promoting electric cooking include mitigating the negative impacts of the use of solid biomass fuels, reducing dependency on LPG imports and the related foreign exchange burdens, utilisation of surplus electricity supply and improving the economic viability of electricity grids by increasing electricity demand and balancing grid loads.

From a gender perspective, electric cooking offers the potential to reduce the burden of work and health hazards related to collecting and using firewood, which largely fall on women. Beyond the benefits that women can derive from electric cooking, engaging women in clean cooking value chains can improve the reach and sustainability of these value chains. Since women are mostly the primary cooks, they are in a better position to convince other women (and men) to invest in clean cooking solutions, thereby helping expand the customer base. Further, women often operate their businesses in areas where commercial actors are absent and are also less likely than men to migrate away from remote and low-income areas. Hence, women can play a critical role in improving access to clean cooking, including electric cooking, in "left behind" and bottom-of-the-pyramid markets. However, as a nascent sector, there are few documented experiences of gender-responsive approaches for practitioners to learn from.

This brief looks at how electric cooking programmes in Nepal and Cambodia have attempted to mainstream gender and social inclusion (GESI) in their electric cooking programmes. It spotlights why gender-responsive policies and strategies can help electric cooking programmes to be more effective and sustainable. The brief is aimed at programme developers, implementers and policymakers working on improving the enabling environment for cleaner cooking, and more broadly the energy sector, and those working on gender equality and social inclusion.

2. Why gender inclusion and social inclusion issues are critical in developing electric cooking markets

Worldwide, women and girls are most affected by the heavy reliance on unclean cooking fuels and the use of inefficient cooking technologies. In 2022, over 2.1 billion people lacked access to clean cooking fuels and technologies, and used polluting alternatives that release high levels of air pollution and put household members at risk of acute and chronic disease[iii]. The burden of this health crisis falls disproportionately on women and children. Women and young girls are forced to spend considerable time collecting fuels and are exposed to violence and sexual harassment during fuelwood collection[iv]. A lack of access to clean cooking solutions also reinforces gender stereotypes, trapping women in traditional, drudgery-filled tasks.

Electric cooking can address many of the negative impacts described above. When households adopt electric cooking, women benefit enormously. Not only does it improve the health of women and children by eliminating the harmful effects of inhaling smoke from traditional fuels, it can also reduce energy costs of cooking and cut down on cooking time and the effort involved in fetching firewood. Women and girls can use the time saved for economic activities, pursuing educational opportunities,

or simply rest[v]. Data from Africa and Asia show that the cost of cooking with an electric pressure cooker is approximately one-third the cost of using LPG, and 20% of the cost of cooking with charcoal[vi].

Gender and social norms play a central role in the uptake of clean cooking. These norms determine household decision-making, and the roles and responsibilities assigned to women, including household chores, cooking, fuel collection and childcare. Although women stand to gain the most from electric cooking, the gender dynamics within families can result in male decision-makers not valuing its benefits, and hence not investing in it. ENERGIA's study in Nepal indicates that while women are the main users of rice cookers, it is men who decide whether to acquire them[vii]. It also showed that besides appliances used by all household members, such as televisions and fans, women tend to prioritise appliances that make their responsibilities easier (e.g. rice cookers, kettles, irons), whereas men tend to buy appliances for business and leisure activities (e.g. TVs, radios, sound systems)[viii]. Ironically, in many households, once a switch to electric cooking takes place, men start to cook, potentially transforming domestic spaces[ix]. Persistent gender gaps in education further limit women's ability to be economically independent and to invest in equipment and cookware necessary for electric cooking[x,xi,xii,xiii,xiv]. Decisions to invest in electric cooking may also be governed by other considerations including the desire for modernisation, urbanisation, a wider availability of electricity, and changing needs, such as the need of food vendors to cook faster for their customers and the expected profits resulting from this. Without sufficient understanding and consideration of these issues, efforts aimed at the upscaling of electric cooking will not be successful.

3. How electric cooking programmes in Nepal and Cambodia applied a gender responsive approach

A gender-responsive approach to electric cooking requires recognising that the purchase and sustained use of electric cooking devices, and women's participation in associated markets, is influenced by the different roles, aspirations and access to resources that men and women have. In this section, we review the experiences of Nepal and Cambodia where programmes have tested specific measures to enhance the gender-responsiveness of electric cooking programmes and draw lessons from these.

A. Electric cooking promotion in Nepal

Nepal's national electricity grid has become stable, enabling households to switch to electric cooking[xv]. Currently, 97.7% of the urban population and 93.7% of the rural population in Nepal have access to electricity[xvi]. The Government of Nepal prioritises electric cooking and has set a target of having 25% of households cooking primarily with electricity by 2030[xvii]. Accordingly, many electric cooking programmes have been implemented, involving a range of partners and implementing strategies.

The primary barriers to the adoption of electric cooktops in Nepal relate to awareness and perceptions, costs, reliability of the electricity supply, and low-quality appliances. There is a lack of awareness of the benefits of electric cooking, especially among women. Low-income households find it difficult to afford the high initial cost of induction cooktops and associated pots, as well as the other necessary expenses, such as additional electricity meters and suitable sockets. These expenses can make it difficult for women to convince their husbands to invest in induction cooktops. There are perceptions that electric cooking is too expensive and not well-aligned with cultural cooking preferences, and a general scepticism about new products. Madhesh Province, where one of the projects is being implemented, also has an unreliable electricity supply with frequent and unannounced outages and voltage fluctuations. This means that women cannot use appliances as much as they would like and when they need to, for example in the morning hours[xviii]. Further, an underdeveloped supply chain and a lack of trained technicians locally makes it particularly difficult for women users to get devices

repaired within a short time and at a reasonable cost. Modern Energy Cooking Services (MECS) research also shows that imports of low-quality appliances and the lack of product standards and information on electric cooking devices can undermine consumer confidence in electric cooking – something that is critical in the early stages of developing an electric cooking market in Nepal[xix].

One of the initiatives promoting electric cooking in Nepal is a technical assistance programme supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and implemented by ENERGIA and its partners[1]. This programme distributed over 400 induction cooktops in Madhesh Province in 2023 and 2024. The initiative implemented several gender strategies to enhance the sustained adoption of induction cooktops:

- Organising orientation and demonstration programmes for potential users at local offices, community centres, marketplaces and schools. Reaching out to families, especially women, led to them attending these events in large numbers. At these events, many women saw induction cooktops for the first time, even though most had heard about them. These sessions gave the women an opportunity to experience the induction cooktops firsthand, cook different dishes on them and have their queries addressed.

- Holding in-depth user training sessions in each neighbourhood once households had acquired induction cooktops and had at-home experience of using them. In these sessions, the women also shared their cooking experiences.

- Training local technicians to repair and maintain the devices as needs arise and supporting them to set up repair businesses by guiding and linking them to sources of investment and potential customers.

A user survey conducted after six months of use found that all the women were satisfied with the device and reported the following benefits:

- **Convenience and ease of cleaning:** Women use induction cooktops to prepare most dishes including typical Nepali dishes of rice, *daal* (lentils), vegetables, milk, snacks and tea. The rapid heating and precise temperature control enhances the cooking process. The smooth, flat surfaces of the induction cooktop mean that food spills do not burn onto the surface, making cleaning quick and hassle-free.
- **Safety:** Women, who previously would continuously tend to their fuelwood stoves for fear of accidents, reported a heightened sense of safety, especially for young children and the elderly. The absence of an open flame reduces the risk of kitchen fires and burns, as does the automatic shut-off feature when no cookware is detected. Further, induction cooktops are placed on a table or a high rack, keeping them out of reach of small children. This gives women the flexibility to do other chores while food is being cooked.
- **Involvement of family members in cooking:** Although women remain the main users, men have started using the induction cooktops to make tea and snacks. The lack of smoke and arduous tasks linked to fire maintenance, and the feeling of modernity associated with electric cooktops, appears to motivate men to take on some cooking tasks.
- **Lower energy bills:** The energy-efficient nature of induction cooking meant a reduction in monthly fuel bills. Previously an LPG cylinder would last for around 2-3 months (used together with

[1] The TA 6526 project "Strengthening the Capacity of the Energy Sector to Deliver Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Results" is implemented by Hivos/ENERGIA, the Centre for Rural Technology, Nepal and the National Association of Community Electricity Users, Nepal. The project runs from April 2021 to September 2025.

firewood). After introducing the induction cooktop, an LPG cylinder lasts for nearly a year. While the ENERGIA survey did not compare costs of cooking with electricity against LPG, recent estimates suggest that households can save between NPR 300 and NPR 1,200 per month by transitioning from 100% LPG to 100% e-cooking[xx]. Women who are often managers of energy budgets, can benefit from these cost savings monetarily and/or by a reduction in budgeting stress.

- **Health:** With reduced smoke emissions, the kitchen is less polluted and a pleasant space to be in.

It was noted that despite its multiple benefits, almost all households continued to use traditional biomass fuels alongside their newly acquired electric cooktops. Reasons include recurrent power cuts and unstable voltage, which restrict the use of electric cooktops, and the preference for some types of foods, such as meat, to be cooked on firewood.

B. Electric cooking promotion in Cambodia

Although about 92% of Cambodian villages have access to electricity, approximately 11 million people continue to rely on cooking fuels such as wood or charcoal[xxi]. Over 14,000 people die each year due to preventable conditions related to household air pollution. Women, people living with chronic conditions (mostly over 40 years old), and children are at the greatest risk. Research also shows unclean cooking practices are responsible for 18% of all deaths in children under five in Cambodia[xxii].

SNV, together with its partners, is promoting a shift to clean cooking through initiatives such as the Higher Tier Cooking Component (HTCC) that focuses on developing supply chains for clean cookstoves in rural areas, the Clean and Improved Cooking (CIC) programme in the Mekong Region that seeks to build an enabling environment and the Smoke-Free Village (SFV) project focused on bringing about behavioural change in local communities.

The Smoke-Free Village (SFV) project aims to shift households from using firewood to using modern cooking solutions including electricity in remote villages. Since 2021, the SFV project has reached 500,000 people in 500 villages. Given that over 31% of households in Cambodia are female-headed, and these are relatively poor, addressing gender inequalities and improving the livelihoods of rural women is an important focus of the SFV strategy. The project's gender-responsive approach includes the following[2]:

[2] Based on discussion with Ouk Narin, *Smoke Free Village (SFV) Project Manager*

- Prioritising so-called IDPoor households[3] and female-headed households for the adoption of electric cooktop through additional subsidies.
- Primarily working with a behavioural change campaign (BCC) that includes community cooking events, such as the SFV Cooking Fair where people sample food cooked on electric cookers. These events are attended by local women in large numbers because they are held in markets that women frequent to make purchases. Three cooking-related behavioural changes are encouraged: 1) keeping children away from smoke, 2) avoiding smoke exposure by ensuring ventilation and drying wood before use, and 3) purchasing electric cooking devices or LPG to replace firewood.
- Engaging men in the BCC events, alongside women. All BCC material, including the stickers, SFV banners and flipbooks, depict both men and women in cooking roles. This is because, while women are the primary users of cooking devices, the project recognises that men are often the decision-makers when it comes to purchasing household assets such as electric cooking devices. Community members respond positively to this inclusive messaging.
- Local authorities, including village chiefs and members of the Commune Council for Women and Children, taking the lead in organising the BCC events. These engage women in coordinating roles, making it easier to interact with other women in their communities.
- Organising door-to-door outreach events to ensure that women who do not attend public meetings are also reached.

Benefits of the SFV project have included a shift to electric cookers and LPG. Some indications of potentially transformed gender roles can be observed with men becoming more willing to undertake cooking tasks when electric cooking devices are adopted. As Mr Nob Somrith, a local leader from Kampot province, commented*, 'Seeing a man cooking on the banner tells people that cooking is not just for women. It's something everyone can do.'* [xxiii]

Alongside the SFV project, SNV also implements the Higher Tier Cooking Component (HTCC) of the Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking programme, which uses results-based financing (RBF)[4] as a financing mechanism for strengthening clean cooking businesses. A challenge that the programme observed was that although women are often engaged in clean cooking businesses, when compared to male-owned businesses, their businesses tend to be smaller, are more likely to be informal and to have little knowledge of financing schemes and processes. During the outreach efforts, it also appeared that female clean cooking entrepreneurs were less confident about applying for RBF and struggled to explain product features and the repair and maintenance aspects well to their customers.
Given this, SNV has taken several proactive measures to encourage women to participate in the project[5]:

- Making RBF announcements through multiple communication channels to ensure the information reached a high number of applicants and enterprises in remote areas, including women. The channels included bongthom.com, the most popular platform for jobs and other announcements, the SNV Facebook page, project staff LinkedIn pages and the Telegram app, the most widespread communication app in Cambodia.

[3] The Cambodian Government implements a standardised procedure for identifying poor households nationwide. Governmental and non-governmental institutions as well as development partners use the generated data for targeting poverty alleviation interventions.
[4] Results-based financing is an umbrella term for a range of financing mechanisms linked to the delivery of pre-agreed and independently verified results.
[5] Based on discussion with Sivleng Voeun, Project Manager

- Reaching out directly to shops, especially women-owned ones, by bringing the project information package and application forms directly to them and supporting them in completing these.
- Conducting localised face-to-face orientation workshops for potential RBF applicants. Information packages in simple language were prepared in Khmer.

The project encouraged many women to participate in the RBF programme. Once they joined, women-led enterprises received tailored business development services and mentoring from the programme[xxiv]. RBF support was used by women entrepreneurs to expand the range of electric cooking products they offered and strengthen their sales strategies. RBF incentives led to a visible transformation in small businesses, including improvements in enterprises' leadership, sales and marketing strategies, enabling them to reach more people. These strategies include shop decorations, engaging sales agents, setting up sales outlets at health centres, holding community meetings, online sales and marketing through platforms like TikTok and Facebook, extending maintenance service periods, offering discounts for IDPoor households, and providing extra gifts as attractions. Given that one of the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs was that they were unable to clearly explain the product features and repair and maintenance aspects, SNV provided them with additional orientation, and developed simple, easy to understand product pamphlets, disseminated along with the electric cooking devices.

Through these initiatives, women and girls have benefitted tremendously given that they are the ones doing the bulk of the work in collecting firewood, cleaning cooking pots and tending the fire. Women using electric cooking solutions report that they have more time to devote to other pursuits, including income-generating activities. Since women manage 70% of the shops selling electric cooking devices in Cambodia, they also benefit from the increased demand for these products[xxv]. As entrepreneurs, they are doing well and over 65% of RBF participants are women-led (50 of 76 enterprises).

4. What are the key elements of a gender-responsive electric cooking programme: Lessons and messages

Below are the key takeaways from the ADB-supported programme in Nepal and the SFV and HTCC programmes in Cambodia in making electric cooking programmes more gender responsive:

Conducting gender-responsive information and awareness campaigns

- Behavioural change campaigns linked to clean cooking efforts must involve user engagement and education. Include matters such as cooktop use and maintenance, recipes adjusted for the new cooktops, and education on the benefits of clean cooking. BCCs should interact with the community at all levels, with attention given to informing the heads of households (often men), the main users of clean energy (often women) and the children who can represent potential drivers of change.
- In electric cooking information and communication campaigns, target both men and women with information relevant to each group and use language, images and themes that resonate with each group. This is necessary since both genders play distinct roles in decision-making, women as the main technology users and men as decision-makers on the purchase of clean cooking technologies.
- Conduct hands-on demonstration events that allow women to handle the technology, to ask questions and to cook local dishes. This will build confidence in the technology and help women address concerns, dispel myths and understand how to operate the electric cooking devices, with which many may not have had first-hand experience. Specifically invite women to the events and ensure that the timing and duration of events are conducive to their participation.
- Utilise channels that women use and are most comfortable with. In this way they can receive complete and accurate information on all aspects of the technology and pricing. Use women's networks such as mothers' groups, health workers and influencers (teachers).
- In marketing campaigns, avoid unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing traditional gender roles by over-emphasising the role of women and undermining the role of men in cooking and care work[xxvi]. By including men in cooking roles in awareness campaigns, programmes can encourage changes in household gender roles.

Ensuring adoption and sustained use

- Ensure that all users, especially women, are fully trained on correct usage and basic maintenance. The best time to conduct these hands-on sessions is soon after a household has purchased a device. These sessions should include cooking tips and techniques specific to induction cooking and identify problem areas. This can help new users adopt the technology more quickly and efficiently.
- Integrate electric cooking in electricity supply strengthening initiatives. Electric cooking rollouts are likely to be more cost-effective and instil greater confidence in women if they target areas with reliable electricity supply.
- Take measures to ensure that high-quality, durable and repairable electric cooking appliances are readily available in the market[xxvii].
- Ensure and, if necessary, create a local infrastructure for repair and maintenance. In most rural areas there are only limited repair and maintenance services available. Given this, before promoting induction cooktops, there is a need to ensure that well-trained technicians are available in sufficient numbers and in suitable locations.

Facilitating affordability from a gender perspective

- Introduce flexible payment schemes so that women who have low access to and control over assets can pay for the cooking solutions. This could include making provisions for the induction cooktops to be paid for in instalments. If households can pay for cooking devices in instalments, they may be able to cover the cost directly from the savings made by not paying for LPG or for charcoal.

Encouraging women to participate in electric cooking value chains and removing barriers for them to do so

- Introduce financing schemes such as RBF to help women expand their businesses to include electric cooking solutions/appliances.

- Make financing schemes, including RBF, more accessible to women by intentionally reaching out to women entrepreneurs, especially those located in small towns and villages. This outreach to potential female participants in RBF programmes must demystify the concepts of RBF, build their confidence and help with applications, record keeping and verification processes.
- Provide women entrepreneurs with targeted business development support, including on basic business skills such as accounting, budgeting, book-keeping and financial management, as well as on areas like brand recognition, consumer financing and innovative marketing.
- Train women entrepreneurs in all aspects of the electric cooking devices that they are selling, including repair and maintenance.

5. Conclusion

As more households in the global South gain access to electricity, there is a growing interest within the development community in leveraging this for clean cooking through a shift towards electric cooking. Such electric cooking programmes could enhance their results by intentionally including a gender approach to ensure that women benefit both as users and as participants in electric cooking value chains. However, given that electric cooking programmes are still nascent, there are few documented experiences from which to draw lessons. This briefing document presents experiences with a gender approach in electric cooking programmes in Nepal and Cambodia. It highlights the need for a gender-responsive outreach for both female customers and female entrepreneurs, affordable financing that accounts for women's income patterns, and local repair, maintenance and aftersales services, as key elements of a gender-responsive electric cooking programme.

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