



# **SUSTAINABLE ENERGY FOR ALL:**

## **the gender dimensions**



UNITED NATIONS  
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality  
and the Empowerment of Women

# Guidance Note

This Guidance Note provides a brief overview of issues related to gender equality, women's empowerment and sustainable energy.

Prepared specifically for the regional and country offices of UN Women and UNIDO, the Note aims to provide guidance for UN programming and work with policy makers around sustainable energy that integrates the gender dimensions.

The Note can help strengthen collaboration with national and regional partners, as well as members of UN Country Teams, and promote South-South exchange of experiences in generating and supplying sustainable energy for all women and men, girls and boys.

It seeks to create a momentum for targeting gender equality as one of the critical pathways for a successful transition to sustainable energy for all by 2030 and for reaching the objectives of the Future We Want.

As such, it will serve as a starting point in working with policy makers and other stakeholders in developing programmatic and policy activities that seek to redefine the gender-energy-development paradigm and expand the role of women in developing and implementing clean sustainable energy solutions.

The Note first presents the international energy situation and the enabling power of energy for economic and social development, as well as the importance of providing communities with access to sustainable energy solutions.

Next, the nexus between women's empowerment, sustainable energy and sustainable development is elaborated. Finally, policy recommendations for UN Women and UNIDO staff are outlined.

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## List of Acronyms

AfDB	African Development Bank	LPG	Liquefied Petroleum Gas
BCI	Barefoot College of India	MRU	Mano River Union
CDM	Clean Development Mechanism	MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	PV	Photovoltaic systems
C3E	U.S. Clean Energy Education & Empowerment Program	OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
DfID	United Kingdom Department for International Development	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
ECREEE	ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency	SELF	The Solar Electric Light Fund
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States	SE4ALL	UN Secretary General's Sustainable Energy for All Initiative
ESMAP	Energy Sector Management Assistance Program	STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations	UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
FUNAE	National Energy Fund (Mozambique)	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
GRB	Gender Responsive Budgeting	UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
IEA	International Energy Agency	UN-HABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development	UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
		WFP	United Nations World Food Programme
		WHO	World Health Organization



## a global energy divide

*Without energy, small and medium enterprises cannot function at maximum capacity. Without energy, industry cannot survive. Without energy, women and girls will continue to spend long hours looking for fuel sources, and will not have jobs.*

Kandeh K. Yumkella,  
UNIDO Director General, April 2013

The world today faces a significant energy divide: between rich and poor countries, with more than 95% of the world's population without access to electricity and clean cooking facilities living in sub-Saharan Africa and developing Asia; within countries, with the wealthiest benefiting from the majority of energy resources; and between urban and rural areas, with 84% of the estimated 1.3 billion people that do not have electricity in their homes living in rural areas (IEA, 2011).

For those who have access to electricity in rural areas, lighting and television use account for at least 80% of electricity consumption, with only 2% of the rural population using electricity for cooking (WHO & UNDP, 2009). Thus, 2.7 billion people still rely on open fires and traditional use of biomass for cooking and almost half of the world's population depends on solid fuels such as wood, dung, crop waste, coal and charcoal (IEA, 2011).



## a *gendered* energy divide

The energy divide is also gendered with women in most developing countries experiencing energy poverty differently and more severely than men. Women are often associated with household activities and are to a large extent responsible for household and community energy provision in many developing countries.

Thus without access to modern energy services, women and girls spend most of their day performing basic subsistence tasks, including time-consuming and physically draining tasks of collecting biomass fuels, which constrains them from accessing decent wage employment, educational opportunities and livelihood enhancing options, as well as limits their options for social and political interaction outside the household (Danielsen, 2012).

At the same time, cooking from biomass is particularly detrimental to the health of women and children. Of the estimated two million annual deaths attributed to indoor air pollution generated by fuels such as coal, wood, charcoal and dung, 85% are women and children who die from cancer, acute respiratory infections and lung disease (WHO & UNDP, 2009).

In fact, illnesses from indoor pollution result in more deaths of women and children annually than HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and malnutrition combined (IISD, 2013). Other important direct health impacts from dirty energy use and indoor air pollution include life-long or chronic diseases, such as asthma; burns to children; injuries to women from carrying wood; and increased violence against women and girls because of lack of street lighting at night (ESMAP, 2007).

Violence against women can also occur during daylight hours in situations where resources are scarce and women are obliged to collect fuel from remote and isolated areas (ENERGIA/DfID, 2006).

The UN Secretary-General's SE4ALL initiative has identified the nexus of energy and health services as they pertain to women's health as a high-impact opportunity for concerted action to provide sustainable, life saving energy solutions. UN Women will be working with the World Health Organization and the United Nations Foundation to increase the access to and availability of modern energy sources for women's health facilities and services in low- and middle-income countries ([unwomen.org](http://unwomen.org))



## the enabling power of energy

Without significant political commitment and investment, energy poverty is set to deteriorate even further over the next 20 years (Danielsen, 2012).

It is, therefore, one of the most critical challenges facing the international community today. At the same time, access to energy is a critical enabler for economic and social development. Once communities have access to modern energy services, the impact on human development is significant: from cleaner indoor air and improved health to more income generating opportunities and more time for other pursuits.

Moreover, promotion of renewable energy technologies has the potential of increasing access to modern energy services in rural areas that currently have no access to grid electricity and pay higher prices for energy service delivery because of the transportation costs and inefficiency of traditional energy forms (UNIDO, 2009).

Moving directly to smaller-scale, renewable energy systems such as stand-alone systems of wind and solar energy can provide communities with affordable energy, promote productivity and help

in creating employment by empowering enterprises for both the rural and urban poor.

At the same time, large-scale, renewable energy systems based on hydropower, modern clean biomass, geothermal, wind or solar energy can diversify energy supply, reduce energy imports and provide significant local and global environmental gains (UNIDO, 2009).

**In April 2012, a coalition of nine countries launched the Clean Energy Education and Empowerment Initiative to attract more young women to careers and leadership positions in the energy field. The member countries of this coalition are Australia, Denmark, Mexico, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UN Women, 2012).**

Because of the gendered nature of energy poverty, access to modern, sustainable energy can also significantly enhance the empowerment of women by reducing their time and labour burdens, improving their health, and providing them with opportunities for enterprise and capacity building.

Access to clean, affordable, sustainable energy is thus an enabling factor for economic development and poverty reduction as well as for achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including ensuring environmental sustainability and promoting gender equality. At the same time, access to energy services can be argued to be a human right in itself.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), for example, explicitly refers to women's electricity rights and obligates state parties to the convention to "take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas [...] [and to] ensure to such women the right [...] to enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications" (quoted in Danielsen, 2012).

In May 2013, the Government of Sierra Leone, the MRU, AfDB, ECREEE and UNIDO jointly organized a three-day conference on Women's Economic Empowerment through Energy Access. The conference aimed to foster multi-stakeholder dialogue on mainstreaming gender in energy access at the institutional, policy and project/programme levels in the sub-region. The conference resulted in the development of an Action Plan on Women's Economic Empowerment through Energy Access for the MRU sub-region, and the adoption of this Action Plan by the Energy and Gender Ministers of the MRU sub-region. In addition, a Mano River Union Working Group on Women and Sustainable Energy was established at the conference to implement the Action Plan (ecreee.org).

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