The Global Initiative
for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on gender equality as a central component of a just transition

Introduction

GI-ESCR is an international human rights non-governmental organisation focused on ending endemic violations of economic, social, and cultural rights, and committed to ensuring that those most affected by these violations are able to influence and engage in international human rights processes.

This submission was developed in response to the call of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Mr. Oliver De Schutter, for contributions to his report on "Just Transition: People in Poverty and Sustainable Development". This submission does not aim to cover all issues related to the call, but will focus on the interlinkages between gender, poverty, and sustainable energy, as well as highlight some of the important elements that must be considered in the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy in order to ensure that this transition does not exacerbate inequalities, but instead advances equality, particularly gender equality.

Why focus on gender equality and the renewable energy transition?

Over the last decade there has been a dramatic shift towards low carbon energy sources to address climate change. The required transition of the energy sector also entails a massive transition of the economy and society, away from an economic model obsessed with growth which is linked to fossil fuel exploitation and consumption and which has generated extreme inequalities, both horizontal and vertical.

However, green energy policies and frameworks often fail to take into account key human rights concerns, particularly women's rights.[1] As of 2015, 145 countries had enacted policies and legal

[1] USAID, ENERGIA, IUCN, *Energizing Equality, The importance of integrating gender equality principles in national energy policies and frameworks,* Environment and Gender Information, (2017), p. 9. Available at: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/iucn-egi-energizing-equality-web.pdf.;

frameworks to regulate and promote renewable energy, but the large majority of these failed to incorporate a gender perspective.[2]

Due to socially construed gender roles, identities, and underlying power dynamics, women and men have different energy needs and differentiated access to energy resources and decision-making processes related to control of energy benefits, sources, and technologies.[3][4] In addition, the structural gender and economic inequalities are compounded by the disproportionate impact that climate change has on women's rights.[5] These intersectional effects of economic injustice, climate change, and gender inequality create conditions that profoundly affect women's abilities to enjoy their fundamental rights and overcome poverty.

I. Advancing gender equality through access to renewable energy

Easing women's domestic and care burden

Women, especially women living in poverty, face multiple obstacles to their enjoyment of rights due to the domestic and care work they are expected to perform throughout their life cycle.[6] In poor and economically vulnerable communities, women spend several hours a day performing domestic work related to energy collection, such as gathering biomass for cooking, lighting, and heating.[7] This creates chronic time deficits, limiting the opportunities for women to enjoy their rights to, *inter alia*, education, work, health, an adequate standard of living and a healthy environment.[8] Even though biomass energy is usually free, "indirect economic costs" for women are enormous in terms of missed opportunities for employment, education, leisure, and self-improvement.[9]

Furthermore, unsustainable biomass collection contributes to deforestation, soil erosion, and loss of watersheds; conditions that are exacerbated with the effects of the escalating climate crisis.[10] As natural resources are depleted and biomass for energy production is harder to find, women and children need to spend more time and cover longer distances to collect the necessary fuel for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In this regard, the provision of renewable energy can simultaneously have a positive impact on women's rights, while combating climate change. For instance, in Brazil, research has shown that girls in rural areas with access to electricity have 59 per cent more opportunity to complete

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[2] UNDP, *Global Gender and Environmental Outlook* (2016), p. 84. Available at: https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/14764/Gender_and_environment_outlook_HIGH_res.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[3] Sustainable Energy for All, *People Centred Accelerator*. Available at: https://www.seforall.org/events/people-centered-accelerator-webinar-series-gender-and-energy-access-part-one-impacts.

[4] ENERGIA, Sustainable Energy for All (SEforAll), and UK Aid, *Levers of Change: How Global Trends Impact Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Access to Sustainable Energy*. (2018), p. 6. Available at: https://www.energia.org/cm2/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Levers-of-Change-How-Global-Trends-Impact-Gender-Equality-and-Social-Inclusion-in-Access-to-Sustainable-Energy.pdf.

[5] CEDAW, *General Recommendation No. 37 on Gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change*, CEDAW/C/GC/37, (2018), para. 3.

[6] Sepúlveda Carmona, Magdalena, '*Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on unpaid care work and women's human rights*, A/68/293, (2013).

[7] IRENA, *Renewable Energy: a Gender Perspective*, (2019), Abu Dhabi, p.14. Available at: https://irena.org/-/media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2019/Jan/IRENA_Gender_perspective_2019.pdf

[8] Ibid. No.6.

[9] Ibid. No.2.

[10] Ibid.

primary education than those without.[11] Energy efficient technologies such as electric appliances or water pumps can also significantly reduce drudgery and mobility by enabling women to complete household chores more quickly,[12] and give them more flexibility in sequencing tasks, as lighting allows them to do more at night.[13] High efficiency and electric cookstoves, for example, can reduce cooking time by more than 50 per cent.[14]

The provision of renewable energy therefore can ease women's domestic burden allowing women to pursue income generating, educational or recreational activities.[15] Additionally, women's access to renewable energies makes biomass collection no longer necessary, reducing natural resource exploitation of local ecosystems and contributing to efforts to protect the environment and to combat climate change by preserving green sinks.

Health benefits for women

The use of biomass as fuel for cooking, heating, and lighting has other serious impacts on women, who suffer disproportionately from the adverse health effects of indoor air pollution that results from cooking, lighting, and heating with solid fuels such as wood, charcoal, crop waste, dung, and coal.[16] It is estimated that every year, 4.3 million people – mainly women and children – die as a result of indoor air pollution.[17] A study in Guatemala showed that a 50 per cent reduction in smoke exposure related to household cooking is associated with an 18 per cent reduction in physician-diagnosed child pneumonia.[18] Access to renewable energy allows women to avoid harmful biomass fuels, and use improved stoves that eliminate air pollution and improve women's health conditions. Access to renewable energy eliminates the need for women's physical labour spent collecting biomass, which also translates into improved maternal and reproductive health.[19]

Reducing violence against women

Another associated impact of the lack of access to reliable sources of energy is the risk of violence against women who must walk long distances to collect biomass.[20] In contexts where small or large-scale outbreaks of violence and social conflict are common, energy-related care and domestic labour leaves women more exposed to harassment, sexual violence, and other

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[11] O'Dell, K., Peters, S. and Wharton, K., *Women, energy, and economic empowerment: Applying a gender lens to amplify the impact of energy access*, Deloitte University Press, (2014).
[12] Sovacool BK, et al., *The energy-enterprise-gender nexus: lessons from the Multifunctional Platform (MFP) in Mali. Renew Energy* 50:115–125; Global Gender and Climate Alliance, *Gender and Climate Change: A Closer Look at Existing Evidence* (2013). p. 19, Available at: https://wedo.org/gender-and-climate-change-a-closer-look-at-existing-evidence-ggca/.
[13] Ibid. No. 7
[14] Ibid. No. 2
[15] ENERGIA, DFID and Collaborative Research Group on Gender and Energy, *From the Millennium Development goals towards a gender-sensitive energy policy research and practice: Empirical evidence and case studies,* CRGGE (2015). Available at: http://www.energia.org/cms/wp-con- tent/uploads/2015/06/49-From-the-millennium-develop-ment-goals-towards-a-gender-sensitive-energy-policy-re- search-and-practice.pdf .
[16] Ibid. No 2. p. 91.
[17] World Health Organization, *Household air pollution and health*, Fact sheet No. 292, (2016). Available at: https://www.who.int/airpollution/household/en/#:~:text=WHO%20recognizes%20that%20air%20pollution,and%2029%25%20from%20lung%20cancer.
[18] Smith, Kirk R., et al, *Effect of Reduction in Household Air Pollution on Childhood Pneumonia in Guatemala*, (*RESPIRE): a Randomised Controlled Trial*, Lancet (London, England), vol. 378, No. 9804, 2011, pp. 1717-26.
[19] Ibid, p. 218.
[20] Ibid. No. 2, p. 90.

forms of gender-based violence.[21] Access to renewable energy will significantly reduce the need to collect biomass, and thus diminish threats to women's safety.

II. Protecting women's rights in renewable energy projects

The rapid growth of solar, wind, hydro, geothermal, and bioenergy have fostered the large-scale development of renewable energy infrastructure which, despite being crucial for climate mitigation, can have negative gender and human rights impacts. Unfortunately, the lessons from development and infrastructure projects have not been learnt, and many renewable energy projects have resulted in human rights abuses against local communities, disproportionately affecting local women.[22] Since women frequently do not have legally recognised rights to their homes and lands, they are usually not consulted and often dispossessed in relocation schemes related to large development and infrastructure projects.[23]

Renewable energy projects have also led to displacement of local communities, in some cases directly affecting traditional lands and resources of indigenous populations.[24] These development projects tend to disproportionately affect women, since women commonly have fewer and less secure land tenure rights than men**,** making them extremely vulnerable to displacement, poverty, and dispossession. [25]

The construction of large renewable energy projects, like major infrastructure projects, involves a significant influx of workers into a community area, which can increase risks of sexual exploitation, harassment, abuse and other forms of gender-based violence to women living or working nearby the project-affected areas.[26] Risks of harassment and violence are also significant for women working in energy infrastructure construction, as it is traditionally a male dominated environment.[27]

To avoid the negative impact that renewable energy projects can have on local communities, renewable energy projects must include the design and enforcement of effective gender strategies, including sexual misconduct policies, and policies that ensure women's rights to land and tenure security. For example, a resettlement that occurred during the construction of a

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[21] Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, *Scaling Adoption of Clean Cooking Solutions through Women's Empowerment: A Resource Guide,* (2013). Available at: https://cleancookstoves.org/ binary-data/RESOURCE/file/000/000/223-1.pdf.; Ibid. No. 2 p. 87.

[22] UN Women, *Extractives Industries, Gender and Conflict in Asia Pacific*', (2020). Available at: https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/03/ap-pve-bls19313_unw_a2j-publications_nrm_web.pdf?la=en&vs=349

[23] Rede ba Rai & GI-ESCR, *Parallel report to CEDAW Committee regarding women's rights to land and property in East Timor* (2015). Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a6e0958f6576ebde0e78c18/t/5b33e2ee03ce64094cad8322/1530127086891/INT_CEDAW_NGO_TLS_21719_E.pdf.

[24] Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, *Fast and Fair, Renewable Energy Investments: A practical Guide for Investors*. (2019). Available at: https://www.business-humanrights.org/sites/default/files/Renewable%20Energy%20Investor%20Briefing_0.pdf.; Ibid. No. 2, p. 87.

[25] Skinner, J., *Women pay heavier price for big dams*. International Institute for Environment and Development (2016). p. 87, Available at: https://www.iied.org/women-pay-heavier-price-for-big-dams; ; Ibid. No. 2.; Open Society Foundation, *Securing Women's Land and Property Rights: a critical step to address HIV, violence, and food security, (* 2019). Available at: https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/0e82bca7-6ede-4fbf-b2d9-5a0dac3ba071/Securing-Womens-Land-Property-Rights-20140308.pdf

[26] Ibid. No. 2.

[27] Fraser, Erika, Viswanath, Kalpana and MacLean Laura, *Violence against Women and Girls, Infrastructure and Cities; Briefing Paper*, Infrastructure and Cities for Economic Development (2017).

hydroelectric project in Laos addressed gender concerns by, *inter alia*, issuing land titles and compensation jointly to both the man and woman in a household.[28] This is essential, as relocation without a gender approach will usually entail the provision of compensation to the head of the household, traditionally men, leaving women unable to share in the benefits of the project. Social safeguards and a strong gender perspective are of crucial importance to protect women's rights and prevent violence against women in the case of large-scale renewable energy projects.

III. Women workers in the energy transition

Workers in the formal and informal economy

As the world accelerates its transition away from fossil fuels and into renewable energy, some workers in the formal and informal economy relying on fossil fuel-based industries and markets will lose their employment and sources of income. All types of employment in extraction of petroleum, mining of coal, biomass recollection, and electricity production from gas and coal, among others, will progressively decrease.[29]

The renewable energy workforce is growing and by 2016 employed 8.3 million people, directly and indirectly worldwide.[30] Studies also show that sustainable energy technologies could, in fact, create more jobs than the fossil fuel industry. For instance, spending on renewable energy will produce nearly 70 per cent more jobs than spending on fossil fuels per dollar of expenditure.[31] Renewable energy projects can thus have a positive gender impact by facilitating labour market entry. This could be by opening pathways for these women workers into the renewable energy industry, or opening pathways for these workers to become energy service providers.[32]

In that light, renewable energy projects need to guarantee decent employment for all, particularly for local people and communities, including informal and part-time workers, since women workers are disproportionately represented among these vulnerable groups of workers.[33] Many existing labour policies seek to compensate workers and communities directly affected by fossil fuel transitions, but it is essential that there is a focus on broader gender and social equality concerns to ensure a just transition.[34]

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[28] Marcos, P. & Urban, A.M., *Gender and renewable energy: Wind, solar, geothermal and hydroelectric energy*. Gender and Diversity Division, Social Sector. Inter-American Development Bank (2014), p. 242. Available at: http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=39647922; Aguilar, L., Granat, M., & Owren, C., *Roots for the future: The landscape and way forward on gender and climate change*, Washington, DC: IUCN & GGCA (2015). Available at: https://www.iucn.org/content/roots-future

[29] UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Accelerating SDG7 Achievement, Policy Brief 13: Interlinkages Between Energy and Jobs*, (2018). Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/17495PB13.pdf.

[30] Ibid. No. 29.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid. No 28

[33] Ibid. No.2. p. 88.

[34] Stockholm Environment Institute, *Realising a just and equitable transition away from fossil fuels* (2019). Available at: https://www.sei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/realizing-a-just-and-equitable-transition-away-from-fossil-fuels.pdf.

Jobs and training for women

Tailored and concerted action needs to be taken to ensure re-training and decent jobs for those who will need to move away from fossil fuel productive activities. Often there is an assumption that male workers will be more impacted by the transition away from fossil fuels since the extractives sector is dominated by male workers. Yet many women also work in the fossil fuel sectors and in associated jobs that will be impacted by a move away from fossil fuels, such as associated service sectors. Therefore, it is important that the just transitions narrative clearly identify and address women's challenges and perspectives, to ensure that re-training initiatives, compensation schemes, social protection arrangements and green jobs are also targeted to women workers, including those working in the informal sector.[35]

To that end, policies need to address the many barriers women face to entry to the renewable energy sector, including: [36]

- The lack of a supportive environment, such as tailored education programmes, flexible work hours, and training opportunities;
- Cultural and social norms regarding gender roles;
- The double burden of work and family responsibilities; and
- Lack of access to financing opportunities to start an energy business.

This can be done by using gender audits, creating supportive education, mentorship, and training programs and networks, as well as introducing gender targets and quotas in the renewable energy sector. For instance, India required that all 23 of its premier engineering institutes increase the enrolment of girls to a minimum of 14 per cent.[37] In Namibia, the Equitable Economic Empowerment Policy seeks to include "previously disadvantaged Namibians", including women, in tender processes for renewables.[38] Gender audits of energy sector policy have also been conducted in several developing countries to ensure the needs and perspective of women are adequately considered.[39]

Another key component is the promotion of women entrepreneurs within the energy sector and improving access to finance to advance women's participation in the renewable energy sector workforce. In that regard, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) based in Ahmedabad, India, for example, provides special energy loans for communities with limited access to electricity. It has also created a cooperative livelihood opportunity for women and established a company that employs women to sell, install and service home lighting systems allowing them to have an income generating activity, while providing accessible and affordable energy solutions to their communities.[40]

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[35] ILO, *Gender, labour and a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies*, (2017). Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a6e0958f6576ebde0e78c18/t/5b33e2ee03ce64094cad8322/1530127086891/INT_CEDAW_NGO_TLS_21719_E.pdf

[36] Ibid, p. 12.

[37] Ibrar, M., *IIT-Delhi tops MHRD mandate, enrolls 16% girls in all its courses, Times of India*, 5 July (2018). Available at: https://timesofindia. indiatimes.com/city/delhi/iit-delhi-tops-mhrd-mandate-enrols- 16-girls-in-all-its-courses/articleshow/64862109.cms, p. 48; Ibid. No.7

[38] IRENA, *Community Benefits of Large-Scale Solar and Wind Projects: Insights from sub-Saharan Africa*, Abu Dhabi (2019) p. 50; Ibid. No. 7

[39] Clancy, J., *Integrating gender awareness into energy policies*, ENERGIA (2011), p. 44; Ibid. No.7

[40] Ibid, p. 72.

Finally, implementing measures to ensure a better work-life balance, such as part-time employment and flexi-time arrangements, needs to be integrated into labour and energy policies to promote women's inclusion in the green energy sector.[41]

IV. Gender-responsive models for the provision of renewable energy

Renewable energy production and provision models that involve decentralized collective and co-operative local institutional arrangements have proven to be very successful in addressing the challenges of intersecting gender inequalities, poverty and energy poverty and climate change.[42] This model has been implemented in several communities in both the Global South and the Global North, with promising results.[43]

For instance, the GoiEner Cooperative was founded in 2012 in the Basque country as a cooperative for the production and consumption of renewable energy. With 9,000 members, it fosters, local and participatory forms of energy provision, allow citizens to invest in local renewable energy projects that have innovative forms of fair billing to fight energy poverty, ensure equal participation of women, and support the creation of other renewable cooperatives in Spain.[44]

A "social solidarity economy" in renewable energy is emerging, and there are many successful examples of renewable energy co-operatives led by women in which a group of women work together to provide mutual support, empowering them to assume leadership roles and overcoming many of the challenges that conventional energy models present (i.e. inefficiency, high prices).[45]

The nature of off-grid renewable energy solutions, including standalone systems and mini-grids, offer transformative possibilities for the development of alternative energy models based on participation, collective ownership, and gender equality. Their decentralized and modular nature make them easily adaptable to ensure co-benefits including access to energy for all members of a community, combating negative gender roles and stereotypes by ensuring women's participation and providing with employment opportunities. In addition, many of the skills needed to take advantage of these possibilities can be developed locally, and women tend to be ideally placed to lead and support the provision of energy solutions in view of their role as primary energy users in households and their extensive social networks.[46] The organization 'Solar Sisters', for instance, trains and supports women to deliver off-grid sustainable energy to their communities in African countries.[47] allowing them to have a reliable source of income and reduce gender power imbalances within their families and communities.

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[41] Ibid, p. 52.

[42] ILO, *Providing Clean Energy and Energy Access to Cooperatives*, (2013). Available at: https://www.uncclearn.org/sites/default/files/inventory/ilo55.pdf; Lédée, Rosalie, *Women and Energy: can renewable energy communities contribute to the empowerment of women?,* Energy Cities: The European Association of cities in the energy transition (2019). Available at: https://energy-cities.eu/women-and-energy/

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid. No.8.

[47] Solar Sisters, 'Impact Stories' (2020). Available at: www.solarsister.org/what-we-do/our-model.

The replication of these gender-responsive and participatory models of renewable energy could significantly contribute to the realization of a just transition to a low carbon-future and the advancement of gender equality.

Conclusions

We hope that the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights will further explore the areas we have highlighted in our submission:

- Extending renewable energy access to poor and rural communities will close the gap in energy access, reduce women's domestic and care work, improve air quality, increase economic and personal development opportunities for women and tackle climate change.
- Due to women's traditional role as caregivers, they are often in charge of household energy management and can thus play a central role in driving the transition towards clean energy. Establishing meaningful participatory mechanisms for women's engagement in all stages of the renewable energy cycle is crucial to developing effective energy solutions tailored to their needs, as well as advancing gender equality.
- Promoting and protecting women's equal land rights and tenure security, in the context of renewable energy projects, is essential to ensuring a just and gender-responsive energy transition. As land is a vital resource providing shelter, housing, food and income, legal rights to land are indispensable to avoiding women's dispossession and impoverishment.
- Effective gender strategies, including effective sexual misconduct policies, are also key to prevent an increase of violence against women in large scale renewable energy projects.
- Concerning the labour market, governments and private actors should implement specifically tailored programmes to ensure the inclusion of women in the workforce of the renewable energy sector, by conducting gender audits, tailoring specific education, training and mentorship programmes and networks, providing greater workplace flexibility, and extending finance to promote women's entrepreneurship.
- Community-based bottom-up models of energy production, distribution and consumption based on principles of a social solidarity economy can create participatory, democratically owned and gender-responsive models to ensure universal access to sustainable energy.