

# Gender and energy at center stage in COVID-19 battle:

## Powering a more gender-equal recovery



### COVID-19, energy and gender

Women are on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic. They need modern and affordable energy to keep up the fight and support the recovery, to make their communities and businesses more resilient for the next pandemic. The coronavirus crisis is putting an unprecedented and enormous strain on the global economy and public health systems, and on the energy supply and access systems that support them. It is also highlighting and magnifying inequalities and the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that women and girls face, including in the energy sector. The pandemic is moving beyond a global health crisis and morphing into a labor market, social and economic crisis, posing a serious threat to women's employment and livelihoods, especially in the small business and informal sectors that already face energy access challenges. Energy access remains as important as ever for households and businesses, as pointed out by the World Bank and the Sustainable Energy for All Initiative,<sup>1</sup> with health infrastructure and women's role in care stressed. Further, traditional cooking smoke may pose an additional risk for women if infected.

This brief is a first look at some critical areas where ENERGIA and its national and international Partners plan to support the international fight against the coronavirus pandemic and its impacts on gender and energy, while also ensuring future resilience and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - particularly SDG 5 on gender and SDG 7 on energy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.seforall.org/news/energy-access-takes-center-stage-in-covid-19-fight>



## The care economy: Ensuring energy access and appliances

Before COVID-19, women were doing three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men, including household chores and cooking, both unpaid and invisible, according to UN Women.<sup>2</sup> Now, unpaid care work in homes is increasing due to social distancing practices, school closures and home schooling, heightened care needs of older and sick people, and more cooking being done at home. Shopping, storing food, and procuring food and fuel are more stressful, risky and time-consuming. And health authorities are calling for more hygienic practices such as handwashing, doing more laundry, and intensified cleaning. Energy and appliances are required for all these tasks.

Meanwhile, women still have to generate an income through paid work. And for those working in healthcare and in other roles on the frontlines, more care economy responsibilities await them at home. More than 70% of frontline workers are women, from cashiers to health workers, in high-risk and low-wage sectors.<sup>3</sup> Besides needing to save time with modern energy appliances, frontline care workers especially must be able to sanitize their clothes and bodies, to avoid spreading the virus to their own families and reduce related stress.

Energy access and electrical appliances are essential to save time and labor linked to the increasing demands of the pandemic and to build future resiliency. These include: modern cooking and baking stoves and ovens; food processing appliances and improved technologies for increased food production; pumping and treating water for sanitation; hot water for more handwashing and bathing; refrigeration to keep

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit.

food fresh longer while sheltering in place; washing machines for higher sanitation requirements; fans for home comfort; adequate lighting in work and study areas, and phone and internet access to maintain crucial communications, including online home schooling and access to safety information during the pandemic. Moreover, with so many activities - from care, to work and education, and leisure activities - centered in the home, electrical appliances may be able to contribute to changing the division of household labor, since men more willing to share housework that uses modern appliances.<sup>4</sup>

The low availability, adoption and use of welfare-enhancing electrical appliances, especially in poor and rural communities, specifically impacts the time women spend in poverty and the drudgery of labor-intensive activities, and their ability to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. Appliance availability also impact women's ability to start home-based businesses that may be more important in the new normal. Gendered social norms and women's agency (i.e., land and asset ownership, independent income, self-help groups) determine whether women are able to turn energy access into energy use. Women's paid and unpaid labor status and power relations dramatically influence their ability and incentive to access modern energy services and appliances.

*Support is thus urgently required to improve the availability and affordability of electrical appliances via promotions, cashless/no-contact mobile payment options, flexible payments, targeted subsidies and appliance rentals, as well as the elimination of utility cut-offs and subsidies for those unable to make payments due to loss of income.*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.energia.org/research/gender-energy-research-programme/>





## Women's empowerment and gender equality: Female energy sector employees and women energy entrepreneurs

The world of work is profoundly affected by the global virus pandemic,<sup>5</sup> including the energy sector. Clean energy is pivotal to providing essential services to people and so are the frontline workers in the sector. About 32% of renewable energy workers are women, according to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).<sup>6</sup> Keeping both male and female employees safe is a priority, with their different hygiene and safety protocol needs and home responsibilities. With lockdowns and remote work, female energy employees have more home and childcare responsibilities. The bottom line is that utilities, renewable energy companies and energy agencies will need to differentiate between women and men in targeting their support policies and practices for remote working and operations.

Women and men need equal access to opportunities to work, which is changing more rapidly than anticipated. Many companies are already making more use of family-friendly flexible leave policies and working in new ways to maintain employee morale and company culture. *In fact, the pandemic and economic recovery could provide energy companies and organizations with the chance to raise productivity by introducing more family-friendly work policies, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, and protecting the most vulnerable groups for example through the Women's Empowerment Principles, established by UN Women and UN Global Compact as a joint initiative.*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/lang--en/index.htm>  
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.irena.org/publications/2019/Jan/Renewable-Energy-A-Gender-Perspective>  
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.empowerwomen.org/en/community/events-opportunities/2020/04/webinar-covid-19-and-gender-equality--what-private-sector-can-do>

Female entrepreneurs both use energy in their businesses, and sell energy appliances and services. They are critical to fast-tracking the last-mile distribution of renewable energy technologies, due to their unique ability to connect with their customers, increase awareness in their communities and deliver products and services through untapped social networks.<sup>8</sup> Female entrepreneurs use their businesses to provide an income for food, healthcare and children's education.<sup>9</sup> With COVID-19, the entrepreneurs and their customers cannot go to markets, and often cannot access raw materials or products. As a consequence, it may be difficult to repay business loans, profits are lower and may be diverted to family emergencies rather than be re-invested, and businesses are closing.

*To ensure clean energy business continuity and jobs, it is important to make sure that coronavirus social protection packages provide direct financial support to salvage the operations of women's energy enterprises directly impacted. For example, in Nepal, banks have provided a three-month grace period for loans to women energy entrepreneurs.<sup>10</sup> Many women entrepreneurs are in the informal sector and are therefore more difficult to reach with support packages. Access to mobile and digital technology is essential to help with e-banking and virtual financial services that are important for empowering women and giving them access to loans and financial services critical for getting them and their businesses back on their feet.*

**Voices of women's enterprises in renewable energy value chains and productive uses of energy in last-mile communities in Africa regarding COVID-19 impacts, April 2020**

*ENERGIA partners carried out an initial rapid assessment of COVID-19 impacts on 111 women entrepreneurs in Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tanzania, in April 2020. These entrepreneurs are involved in solar technologies, including solar fridges and water pumping, improved cookstoves, productive uses of energy, and biomass and briquettes. Nearly 90% were 'somewhat' to 'very worried' about COVID-19. Financial stress was the most dominant concern: How to pay bills and buy food? Revenue and customers have been declining in the previous two months, due to lockdowns, market closures, and reduced mobility. Their customers also faced reduced income levels and were prioritizing food. None of the women entrepreneurs were aware of any relief packages for businesses, and 80% had not seen any support at all in their communities. The others had received either masks from private organizations, or food via their local governments or churches. Women entrepreneurs with a smartphone were able to contact some customers and post products via WhatsApp, and they could also get pictures from flyers via their program mentors. But only a third of the women entrepreneurs had both a smartphone, and the ability to charge it all the time.*

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.energia.org/cm2/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Supporting-Last-Mile-Women-Entrepreneurs.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.energia.org/cm2/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/RA5-Female-microenterprise-creation.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Nepal Rastra Bank Unified Directives March 29, 2020 (2076.12.16.)



## Energy response and recovery plans: Mitigate gender-based vulnerabilities that are intensified by COVID-19

### **Clean cooking solutions: Exposure to air pollution can make COVID-19 worse.<sup>11</sup>**

Globally, almost 3 billion people rely on open fires or inefficient stoves to cook their food, with exposure to smoke particularly high among women and children. In China, for instance, male smokers have been harder hit by the coronavirus, and household air pollution from traditional biomass cooking in Africa and South Asia increases one's susceptibility to respiratory infections and could lead to higher mortality rates for women with COVID-19. Furthermore, according to a survey conducted by the Clean Cooking Alliance, the current economic slowdown and lower income levels could cause a return to firewood and other polluting biomass fuels, creating health and environmental impacts for months or years.<sup>12</sup>

The Alliance has therefore suggested that: *"governments and all other actors (private sector and development partners) should make clean cooking part of their pandemic emergency response plans and provide immediate support to vulnerable consumers."* Countries are speeding up their cooking energy access strategies. For example, India is giving away millions of cooking gas cylinders to the needy, as part of pandemic emergency response plans,<sup>13</sup> and Nepal is preparing to implement a subsidy plan to promote the use of induction stoves for low consuming households.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cleancookingalliance.org/resources/589.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/to-counter-the-covid-19-pandemic-bring-more-poor-into-the-lpg-net/story-drzPH8Jk26uRXsSvaqfz2J.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/govt-prepares-rs-1b-subsidy-to-promote-use-of-induction-stove/>

**Unaffordable electricity costs.** For the poorest and most vulnerable women, this pandemic has the potential to be catastrophic. Women are disproportionately affected by economic shutdowns because they are more likely to be informal workers and entrepreneurs. Informal sector and low-income, female-headed households and women living rural and remote areas, are among the most vulnerable groups affected by social distancing and unemployment – women are earning less, saving less, and holding more insecure jobs. This will have an impact on their capacity to pay their electricity bills, leaving them at risk of disconnection during the crisis and further impacting their livelihoods, income and family welfare.

*Government relief packages should thus include flexible payment plans, waivers to mitigate service disruption, and cash transfers targeted at vulnerable consumers in the energy sector, including the poorest and most vulnerable women. For example, Ghana, among other countries, is subsidizing electricity costs for three months for the poor, as part of its pandemic emergency response plans.<sup>15</sup>*

**Gender-Based Violence (GBV).** According to UN Women’s policy brief, gender-based violence (GBV) is increasing exponentially with shelter-in-place, as security, health and money worries heighten tensions and strains are accentuated by cramped and confined living quarters.<sup>16,17</sup> Furthermore, women are at high risk of exposure to GBV while procuring cooking fuels, particularly in humanitarian and fragile settings.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <https://practicalaction.org/practical-action-responds-to-coronavirus-crisis/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

<sup>17</sup> For example, local media in Kenya (Standard Newspaper dated 14th April 2020), reported a spike in recorded sexual offenses across the country with more than a third of all criminal cases reported to authorities between March and April 2020 being sexual in nature.

<sup>18</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/EEMRG-Global-Learning-Report-101619-NOCaseStudies.pdf>



*To increase women's access to protection messaging, it is essential to power and ensure women's access to communication tools such as solar radios and mobile phone chargers. Women need to be able to stay informed about protection messaging and mitigation strategies, as well as about measures and benefits being provided by national governments. Better lighting in homes and public spaces is also an important deterrent to reduce gender-based violence and can better enable social distancing.*

**Powering health infrastructure.** Healthcare infrastructure, on which women and children depend, needs electricity to function effectively: Only 28% of healthcare facilities in Sub-Saharan Africa benefit from reliable electricity. Other health services, for example sexual and reproductive services, are affected by overwhelmed or closed health services, and this is likely to affect a key SDG indicator, reduction in maternal deaths - the majority of which are preventable. Lockdowns could indirectly create health crises. Women of reproductive age and children are particularly vulnerable: pregnant women may find it difficult to access ante- and post-natal care or get to functioning health posts for delivery; vaccine coverage rates are likely to fall acutely; and children with acute non-COVID illnesses may be kept at home instead of taken to health centers.<sup>19</sup>

The World Bank and the Sustainable Energy for All Initiative have therefore called on governments and their development partners to *fast-track electricity access for healthcare facilities, noting that mini-grids and off-grid systems such as modular solar with battery energy storage systems can be deployed quickly to underserved and rural health clinics to improve reliability or provide new access.*<sup>20</sup>

**The 'digital divide' in communications.** Lack of electricity access can exclude women from the digital economy, at a time when COVID-19 requires participating in a digitized labor market. With a lack of adequate broadband infrastructure and the electricity to power it across many developing countries, the 'digital divide' in access to the internet and digital illiteracy (as well as illiteracy itself) among older women, are issues that can exclude women from the internet and digital technologies that are quickly becoming prerequisites not only for attaining decent employment but also for cultural and political engagement.<sup>21</sup> With social distancing, women in rural and poor households need access to solar radios and mobile phone chargers to be aware about gender-based violence and to stay informed about coronavirus mitigation strategies. Furthermore, distance learning, which is becoming more prevalent, relies on electricity access for internet connections as well as home lighting for study. Yet two-thirds of schools in Sub-Saharan Africa do not have reliable electricity, and only 43% of households.<sup>22</sup> Girls' education can also suffer from the increased workload for females because of the pandemic.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.poverty-action.org/recover-study/house-calls-understanding-and-reducing-impact-covid-19-women-rural-india>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.seforall.org/news/energy-access-takes-center-stage-in-covid-19-fight>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.fes-mena.org/events/e/the-future-of-work-is-here-a-regional-feminist-perspective-on-the-effects-of-covid-19/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/31333/9781464813610.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y>



*Communications channels and electric power, both grid and decentralized, need to be ensured and expanded for internet services, radios, mobile phones and TVs – women’s main communication channels - to help both women and men live with and recover from the pandemic.*

**The way forward: Integrating gender and ensuring women’s representation in COVID-19 response and economy recovery planning and decision-making in the energy sector**

Evidence from the ENERGIA Gender and Energy Research program demonstrates unquestionably that energy policies that do not consult women or include them in decision-making are simply less effective, and can even do harm.<sup>23</sup> Integrating gender and ensuring women’s representation in COVID-19 response and recovery planning and decision-making in the energy sector is indispensable to enabling women to advance rather than be left further behind with the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

*Post-COVID-19 economic recovery plans must include equitable access to and control over sustainable energy services for women and men as an essential right to development.*

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.energia.org/research/gender-energy-research-programme/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4.13.20-Final-Cover-D2-Feminist-Economic-Recovery-D1.pdf>

Many international actors are visualizing energy access futures in the context of the pandemic and recovery. ENERGIA aims to make sure that gender and energy will be part of that conversation, and that the voices of our partners are heard. In the coming weeks, ENERGIA and its Partners will be developing a COVID-19 response and recovery strategy that includes sharing perspectives and experiences from the field, seeking to mobilize actions and funding to mitigate impacts innovate responses, and working with our national and international partners to bring a gender lens to the coronavirus response. Opportunities to support the gender and energy agenda need to be identified, so that new best practices coming out of the pandemic (for example in health and business assistance) can reinforce and promote gender equality in the energy sector.

Besides advocating at all levels on these issues and for including gender and energy in national economic recovery plans and energy sector planning, ENERGIA will be seeking to leverage pandemic mitigation and recovery opportunities in its existing programs. An economic safety net for our women entrepreneurs' program, thought leadership through communications and knowledge management, an enabling environment, and networking, will be key pillars.

Some of the actions already initiated or under consideration by ENERGIA and its Partners in its four intervention areas include:

- **Economic safety net for our women entrepreneurs program**, e.g., proposing an emergency, rapid-response solidarity fund to keep our 3,000 women energy entrepreneurs in business to continue making sustainable energy appliances and technologies available; supporting entrepreneurs and staff with protective equipment, and providing solar chargers for health workers (Solar Sisters); and enhanced virtual communications capabilities with smartphones for women entrepreneurs.
- **Supportive enabling environment**, e.g., support to ministries of energy and local governments to integrate gender and energy and ensure women's representation in COVID-19 economic recovery plans and energy sector planning; support to renewable energy companies, local finance institutions and utilities to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace; and integrating gender and energy in high-level policy briefs, intergovernmental dialogues on SDG 7 and COVID-19.
- **Thought leadership: Communications**, e.g., this briefing note; a series of COVID-19 impact stories on women entrepreneurs, local governments, direct project implementation, etc. in the energy sector; an awareness raising and information webinar on gender and energy linkages with the pandemic; joint opinion pieces with key influencers; and using existing radio outlets, mentors and champions, and messaging media, to support local governments to address gender-based violence and coronavirus awareness.

- **Thought leadership: Knowledge management**, e.g., lean data surveys (using mobile phones) to capture critical insights into the effects of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs; surveying energy industry leaders to see how gender is being considered in crisis policymaking; including COVID-19 in planned action research on gendered differences in the adoption and impacts of renewable energy appliances and on electric cooking; and support to innovation proposals on gender and energy issues in response to COVID-19.
- **Networking**, e.g., sharing perspectives and experiences on COVID-19 response plans among partners, including during a virtual ENERGIA partner meeting; and working with the ENERGIA Advisory Group to reflect and develop post-COVID-19 scenarios for gender and energy.

As countries prepare and implement COVID-19 response and recovery plans, it will be critical to integrate gender assessments in energy planning processes, to recommit to collecting better sex-disaggregated data as systems monitor energy interventions response to the crisis, and to ensure women’s representation in the energy decision-making processes for the recovery. Post-COVID-19 economic recovery plans must include equitable access to and control over sustainable energy services for women and men as an essential right to development.

*Keeping a gender lens on energy throughout the COVID-19 battle offers a crucial opportunity to power a more gender-equal response and recovery, including sustainable energy for all.*

*This briefing note has been prepared by the ENERGIA International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy, with substantive inputs from the ENERGIA Advisory Group,<sup>25</sup> the ENERGIA International Secretariat, and ENERGIA’s host and international and national Partners: Hivos, the Kenya Ministry of Energy, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Solar Sister, Practical Action, Energy for Impact, Tanzania Gender and Sustainable Energy Network, Centre for Rural Technology Nepal, National Association of Community Electricity Users-Nepal, the Renewable Energy Confederation of Nepal, the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists, Indoor Air Pollution and Health Forum Nepal. This briefing note was prepared by Elizabeth Cecelski, Acting Chair of the ENERGIA Advisory Group, and Sheila Oparaocha, ENERGIA International Coordinator and Program Manager.*

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.energia.org/who-we-are/advisory-group/>



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ENERGIA, the International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy is an international network of like-minded organizations and individuals working in Africa and Asia. Our vision is that women and men have equal and equitable access to and control over sustainable energy services as an essential human right to development. ENERGIA is hosted by Hivos, an international organization based in the Netherlands.

More information on ENERGIA can be found at: [www.energia.org](http://www.energia.org)

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