

# Energy Access and Gender in Pakistan: Policy Brief

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## INTRODUCTION

Energy access is inextricably linked to gender equity, a theme that cuts across the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is imperative to achieve sustainability targets. Yet, energy policies in Pakistan remain 'gender-blind', focusing on improving energy access without considering the differential impacts of how men and women access, consume, are affected by, or benefit from energy practices and policies.

About 26% of Pakistan's population (56 million people) lacks access to electricity and 51% (110 million) lacks access to clean cooking facilities. The energy sector faces critical challenges of centralised governance, intermittency of supply and limited share of renewables (5%). Lack of an integrated energy policy results in a disconnect between top-down regulation of (on-grid) urban electrification and bottom-up (off-grid) rural initiatives that remain limited and unregulated. Hence, issues of affordability, reliability and sustainability persist. Further, Pakistan ranked 151 out of 153 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index Report 2020, with its Human Development Index 25% lower for women compared to men. Although gender is prioritised in the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002), Gender Reform Action Plan (2005), and Vision 2025, significant gaps persist in Pakistan's SDG National Framework, including lack of baseline data, clear intervention targets, and attention to intersections between SDG5 (gender equality) and SDG7 (energy access).

This policy brief highlights existing gaps and recommendations for gender equity in Pakistan's energy policies and practices, based on interviews with 21 energy sector professionals (including stakeholders from policy/regulatory bodies, energy utilities, development authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and electricity service providers).

## CHALLENGES FOR POLICY

- **Gender-blind energy policies:** policy bodies and electric utilities focus exclusively on energy provision, neglecting energy use and its differential impacts (in terms of quality and equity). Gender differences are perceived only in terms of the use of energy services, and not in access to energy, which is presumed to benefit all household members equally. This results in a disconnect between 'gender-neutral' policy objectives and gender-biased energy outcomes at local level, in which women's differential energy access (e.g. in urban/rural divides and income/class differences) and needs (e.g. in home-based economic activities) remain marginalised.
- **Lack of gender disaggregated data:** Policy/regulatory bodies and energy utilities/suppliers lack sufficient fieldworkers and rely on national surveys for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of energy consumption that lack gender disaggregated data to inform gender-sensitive energy policy.
- **Women's underrepresentation in energy sector:** women's participation in energy decision-making, planning and policy remains limited due to patriarchal norms, cultural barriers, safety concerns (especially around site-visits) and inadequate facilities. Absence of women employees in fieldwork consequently limits engagement with women end-users and further inhibits gender-sensitive data collection and interventions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

### 1. Develop gender-responsive energy policy and practice through:

- **Gender-mainstreaming in energy policies and budgets with clear indication of intended targeting and gendered impacts:** recognise that urban, low income and rural women may face different energy challenges and be excluded from access to energy services due to lack of efficient fuel types, technologies, reliable supply, know-how and skills, mobility restrictions, time constraints and existing patriarchal norms.
- **An integrated energy framework** to overcome the disconnect between access to energy supply, access to energy services and actual (gendered) differential energy use: This can be facilitated through effective **decentralisation and distribution of the energy system** to address local inequities and challenges (e.g. addressing reliability in urban slums and availability in rural/remote areas). Further, this can enable decentralisation of energy decision-making, allowing greater community participation and grass-roots innovation, especially by women.
- **Developing energy policies in conjunction with related non-energy policies for gender equity,** such as gender-sensitive urban planning and development; health-related policies for women's social/psychological empowerment and well-being; equal opportunities for education, employment and mobility; legislation for home-based workers, asset ownership and financing, etc.

### 2. Determine the right scale and scope of intervention through:

- **Gender disaggregated data on energy access in energy provision programmes and processes** to target urban/rural women's specific energy needs (e.g. in home-based working).
- **Developing appropriate M&E techniques** for culturally sensitive modes of data collection, e.g. using observation in addition to gender-based surveys and employing women fieldworkers to interact with women end-users.
- **Designing, targeting and implementing interventions that are gender-sensitive** (e.g. considering impacts of mobility interventions or solar home solutions on women's needs) and that address wider social and economic imbalances (e.g. micro-financing targeted at women).
- **Tailored community-based energy solutions:** ministries of energy and electric utilities could partner with local small and medium energy enterprises and NGOs to work with off-grid communities. This will provide regulatory oversight for off-grid electrification (e.g. in ensuring minimum efficiency/performance standards for energy technologies) and help overcome institutional biases or contextual oversights (e.g. in ensuring user acceptance and alignment with local cultural practices).

### 3. Increase women's representation in the energy sector through:

- **Improving women's participation as key change-agents in all aspects of the energy-supply chain.** This means ensuring gender quotas are met; implementing anti-harassment laws; and ensuring enabling environments and support structures (e.g. day-care facilities and paid maternity leave), adequate fieldwork facilities (e.g. separate washrooms), and equal opportunities for employment and upward mobility.
- **Supporting women's socio-economic and political empowerment** by ensuring opportunities for capacity building, technical/skills training, and higher enrollment in science-based education and mentorship programmes. Encourage women to take on traditionally masculine roles, such as meter reading (as currently initiated by the company K-Electric) and community solar power management (such as in the Roshna Bibi project), to challenge stereotypes and transform gender relations.
- **Appointing Gender Development Sections, equality and diversity committees, and gender specialists** in all energy ministries, electric utilities, and statutory bodies. Establish concrete deliverables and resource allocations through a Gender Action Plan to mitigate institutional gender barriers and operationalise gender mainstreaming and capacity building in energy projects (e.g. mandating gender budgets and audits in tendering processes). This can be facilitated through partnerships with women's rights groups or NGOs such as The National Commission on the Status of Women and All Pakistan Women's Association.

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*The views and analysis expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the partner organisations.*

## KEY REFERENCES

Khalid, R. and Foulds, C., 2021. Gendering practices and policies in the South: Lessons for improved equity and sustainability in Pakistan's domestic energy sector. In *ECEEE 2021 Digital Summer Study Proceedings- Energy efficiency in the new reality*.

