

The Nexus Between Gender Equality and Access to Clean Energy in Rural Communities

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Abstract

Gender equality and access to clean energy are both fundamental pillars of sustainable development. However, the interconnectedness between these two goals especially in rural contexts remains underexplored. This study examines the intricate link between gender and energy access, emphasizing how improved access to clean energy (such as solar, biogas, and improved cookstoves) empowers women socially, economically, and politically in rural communities. Utilizing a qualitative approach through secondary data analysis and case studies from sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, the research finds that clean energy access significantly reduces time poverty among women, improves health outcomes, enhances educational attainment, and fosters women's participation in income-generating activities. Nonetheless, systemic barriers—such as gender norms, lack of financing, and exclusion from decision-making—continue to hinder equitable energy transitions. The study recommends gender-responsive energy policies and community-driven initiatives to ensure that the shift to clean energy also supports gender equality in rural settings.

INTRODUCTION

Access to clean and affordable energy is essential for poverty reduction, health, education, and overall well-being. Recognizing its importance, the United Nations included Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG 7) to “ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all” (UN, 2015; Rahmat & Alawiyah, 2020; Putri et al., 2020; Ardinata et al., 2022; Rahmat et al., 2021; Marufah et al., 2020; Bastian et al., 2021; Alawiyah et al., 2020; Rahmat, 2019; Syarifah et al., 2020). Simultaneously, SDG 5 advocates for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. While these goals are often treated as separate domains, their intersection—particularly in rural contexts—reveals powerful synergies.

In many rural communities, particularly in the Global South, women bear the brunt of energy poverty. They are disproportionately responsible for collecting firewood, cooking with polluting fuels, and managing energy use in households. This burden not only affects their health but also limits their time and opportunities for education, income-generating activities, and civic participation (Clancy et al., 2012; Muara et al., 2021; Rahmat et al., 2021; Pratikno et al., 2020; Priambodo et al., 2020; Rahmanisa et al., 2021; Rahmat & Budiarto, 2021; Zakiyah et al., 2022; Hakim et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2021; Utama et al., 2020; Adri et al., 2020; Yuliarta & Rahmat, 2021; Rahmat & Kurniadi, 2020; Rahmat et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2020). Conversely, access to clean energy technologies can transform women's lives by reducing labor, improving safety, and creating new economic pathways.

Despite these links, energy policies and interventions have historically been gender-blind. This paper explores the nexus between gender equality and clean energy access in rural communities, investigating how clean energy initiatives can promote women's empowerment and how gender-sensitive approaches can improve energy outcomes.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive approach using secondary data analysis and case study comparison. The goal is to synthesize insights from existing literature and real-world interventions to illustrate how gender and clean energy access interact.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gendered Dimensions of Energy Poverty in Rural Areas

Women in rural areas often rely on traditional biomass—wood, charcoal, and dung—for cooking and heating. This exposes them to indoor air pollution, which is a leading cause of respiratory diseases and premature deaths (IEA, 2022; Rahmat, 2019; Banjarnahor et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2020; Gustaman et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2022; Kodar et al., 2020; Najib & Rahmat, 2021; Rahmat et al., 2020; Widyaningrum et al., 2020; Yurika et al., 2022; Muara et al., 2021; Aminullah et al., 2021; Wulandara & Rahmat, 2024; Ardinata et al., 2023; Pamungkas & Rahmat, 2023; Rahmat et al., 2020; Febrina & Rahmat, 2024; Rahmat, 2023). According to the WHO (2018), over 3.2 million people die each year due to illnesses associated with household air pollution, with women and children most affected. In addition, women and girls spend hours collecting fuel, reducing their time for education, rest, or economic activities. This phenomenon, known as time poverty, reinforces gender inequality and hinders broader rural development.

Empowerment Through Clean Energy Access

Access to clean energy—particularly improved cookstoves, solar home systems, and biogas—can catalyze women's empowerment in several ways:

- a. **Health Benefits:** Cleaner fuels reduce indoor air pollution, leading to better health outcomes.
- b. **Economic Opportunities:** Women gain time to engage in small enterprises (e.g., sewing, food processing, phone charging businesses).
- c. **Education and Literacy:** Girls can attend school instead of collecting wood; homes with lighting enable nighttime study.
- d. **Safety and Mobility:** Access to lighting improves women's security in public and private spaces.

For instance, in Nepal, biogas projects have enabled women to spend more time on farming and education, reducing their dependence on wood fuel (Gurung et al., 2011). In Tanzania, women using solar lamps reported improved well-being, increased income, and better performance of children in school (Practical Action, 2017).

Barriers to Gender-Equitable Energy Access

Despite the benefits, gender disparities in access persist due to:

- a. **Financial Constraints:** Women often lack collateral or formal income to access loans for energy products.
- b. **Limited Decision-Making Power:** Energy decisions are frequently made by men, marginalizing women's preferences or needs.
- c. **Lack of Awareness:** Gendered communication barriers limit women's exposure to energy solutions.
- d. **Cultural Norms:** Social expectations may restrict women from engaging in energy businesses or technical roles.

These barriers highlight the need for targeted interventions that address the structural causes of gender inequality in energy systems.

Case Study Highlights

Kenya – Women Entrepreneurs in Solar Energy (M-KOPA & Solar Sister). Kenya has pioneered inclusive solar energy access through mobile-enabled pay-as-you-go models. Organizations like Solar Sister train women as solar entrepreneurs, enabling them to earn income while expanding energy access in their communities. This dual benefit advances both SDG 5 and SDG 7 (Greenaway et al., 2019; Ma'dika & Rahmat, 2024; Saputra & Rahmat, 2024; Nuralasari et al., 2022; Pratama et al., 2024; Rahmat, 2024; Rahmat & Pernanda, 2021; Rahmat et al., 2021; Rahmat et al., 2022; Akbar et al., 2024; Rahmat et al., 2023, Baarik et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2024).

Indonesia – Gender Integration in Clean Cooking Programs. Indonesia's National Program for Self-Sufficient Energy Villages incorporated women in decision-making and stove distribution roles. Women were also trained in stove use and maintenance, ensuring higher adoption rates and sustainability of the intervention (ENERGIA, 2017).

Nepal – Biogas Support Program. Nepal's Biogas Support Program actively targeted women with microcredit schemes and training. As a result, over 50% of the biogas units were used and managed by women, leading to improved livelihoods and leadership roles within the community (Gurung et al., 2011; Nurhadiyanta et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2018; Rahmat et al., 2024; Hasrian et al., 2023; Akbar et al., 2024; Rahmat, 2024; Piliang et al., 2024; Priantoro et al., 2024; Hasrian & Rahmat, 2024; Syazali et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2024; Ma'ruf & Rahmat, 2024; Rahmat et al., 2024; Meidiyustiani & Rahmat, 2024; Ma'ruf & Rahmat, 2024; Aprilyanto et al., 2023). These examples show that gender-sensitive energy policies not only improve energy outcomes but also contribute to broader social transformation.

Policy Recommendations

To strengthen the gender-energy nexus in rural communities, this study recommends:

- a. **Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Policy:** Ensure that energy policies integrate gender assessments and provide disaggregated data to inform interventions.
- b. **Financing Mechanisms for Women:** Expand access to microfinance, subsidies, and mobile payment schemes tailored to women.
- c. **Capacity Building and Education:** Train women in energy technologies, entrepreneurship, and leadership to foster long-term participation.
- d. **Community Participation:** Involve women in energy planning and decision-making at local and national levels.
- e. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Develop gender-sensitive indicators to measure the social impact of clean energy projects.

CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between gender equality and clean energy access is both mutually reinforcing and essential for achieving the 2030 Agenda. In rural communities, women are disproportionately affected by energy poverty—but also stand to benefit the most from clean energy access. When provided with appropriate tools, financing, and agency, women can become powerful agents of change in advancing sustainable energy transitions. This study has shown that gender-responsive clean energy interventions—through improved health, increased income, education, and participation—can catalyze rural development while dismantling structural inequalities. Future energy programs must place women at the center, not only as beneficiaries but also as leaders and innovators in the clean energy revolution.

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