

Position Paper: Women and sustainable energy

Achieving universal access to clean electricity is crucial to human development, as electrification not only provides lighting, but also has the potential to dramatically improve living conditions, the quality of health services and spur income-generating activities through the productive use of renewable energy. At the same time, it needs to be stressed that priorities in energy access differ between genders, and that their existing capacities to be agents of change towards these goals differ too.

Both the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDG) and [Sustainable Energy for All](#) (SE4All) Initiative recognise universal access to clean energy as a primary goal, and specifically highlight the gender aspect of the topic, in terms of different needs of women and men as end-users of electricity. Yet, approaches to electricity in policy, planning and programmes are often gender blind and assume that investments in electrification will benefit women and men equally. Only in a few cases have women been involved and/or taken into consideration in the formulation of electrification policies.

Women are the main users of household energy; they influence and make many family purchases related to energy and this gives them the capacity to be effective promoters of new technologies in the energy sector. As women are often primary users of clean energy, policies need to take into account not only the common electricity needs of men and women but also their gender-specific needs.

The [Alliance for Rural Electrification](#) is the only global business association that represents the whole decentralised renewable energy sector for rural electrification in developing and emerging countries. ARE works with key partner organisations, agencies and governments to promote and advance attractive market conditions to mobilise and increase private sector engagement for the benefit of the rural energy poor.

ARE is supportive of empowering women as the key agents of change in achieving SE4All & SDG7 targets to achieve universal energy access by 2030.

For energy access to become a universal reality, the Alliance for Rural Electrification (ARE) believes that it is crucial to address the structural causes of gender inequality. We strongly advocate for women's involvement in policy making and planning processes, as agents of change in the supply of clean rural electricity and to ensure that their views and experiences are reflected in the resulting measures. ARE also seeks to promote women's social and economic empowerment through energy value chains.

We have identified three key recommendations on the policy and regulatory level that we feel should be put in place to address women's needs, constraints and opportunities, while further enabling women's active role in the overall mission of achieving universal energy access by 2030.

Key recommendations

1. Gender balance in decision-making

To ensure equitable participation in decision-making, we call for gender balance on management boards, expert panels and advisory groups. Equal representation of women in decision-making bodies can ensure that women's perspectives are included. More women at the decision-making level as well as at the implementation level in the energy sector is essential.

Some detailed recommendations include:

- a) **Local assessment of the specific geographical context and situation**, in order to evaluate all barriers and opportunities for women, in consultation with local NGOs and/or stakeholders. This will identify opportunities and encourage local employment of women, as well as of men in rural electrification work. The current energy sector should also inform better on workforce profiles.

Moreover, the typical framing of gender in energy policies can often focus on the welfare/health side – ignoring or reducing the economic and political empowerment benefits of women’s access to energy. This will help to identify the types of interventions that will make the most difference to women in their household and productive activities.

- b) **Training and networking activities for women** for the uptake of renewable energy technologies. This is key even in a context where the legal framework supports gender equality as proper capacity building will lead to economic and financial liberty of women by increasing income-generating opportunities and thus enhance women’s social and political status.

Training and networking activities include: i) building capacity of women to work in the clean energy sector as policy makers, designers and managers, ii) building capacity of both women and men to engage with gender issues in energy solutions and iii) supporting women’s career development through training courses and mentorship programmes, in order to create a group of qualified women able to make an impact on the gender balance in energy institutions.

- c) Along with access, **promote women’s involvement in income-generating activities** in order to empower them economically and increase women’s bargaining power in household decision-making. For example, more women should be integrated as employees in companies that sell and lease renewable energy technology and services.

It should also be recognised that men and women have different working styles (i.e. women often prefer cooperative models of working) and strengths (in practice women are often very effective in fee collection and in installation and maintenance of systems) as well as focus on simple innovations that are affordable, durable, easy to use and maintain and especially life-changing.

Case study 1. Practical Action: ‘Women in Energy Enterprises in Kenya’ Project

The project is being implemented in Kenya by Practical Action in partnership with Sustainable Community Development Services (SCODE) with support from ENERGIA International and aims at building and expanding businesses for 730 women energy entrepreneurs in three renewable energy markets: improved cook stoves, solar products, and biomass briquettes. Women entrepreneurs are involved in the three value chains and their capacity to effectively participate in and benefit from energy markets is being strengthened. The project uses an enterprise development model to empower women economically and provides tailor-made support to women entrepreneurs in market assessment,

career mentorship and technology skills training. It also seeks to expand and strengthen entrepreneurial associations and community finance systems for business owners to provide additional support and also raises awareness of the different energy technologies available to meet lighting and cooking needs. Targets to reach over 360,000 beneficiaries including households, catering establishments and institutions.

2. Target funding and business models for women

To ensure access to equal funding/investment opportunities in renewable energy projects, we call for new targeted funding for women's activities that promote their active participation in energy markets. Support to women-led enterprises must go much beyond micro-credit, and look to provide other dimensions of support – and provide more appropriate (longer term) finance. Development programmes should pivot around finding ways of enabling women's access to affordable finance and credit, which are not based on land and asset ownership, and supporting female energy entrepreneurs to address other barriers which they face (e.g. low mobility due to their reproductive roles, hence less access to markets and low uptake of interventions; low technology and business skills; businesses that are labour and energy intensive and low paying; lack of confidence as entrepreneurs etc.).

Some detailed recommendations include:

1. Inclusion of **gender criteria for renewable energy funding programmes** as well as for training of women energy practitioners, researchers, policymakers and entrepreneurs.
2. Agency/empowerment and self-leadership training to build self-confidence of women/energy entrepreneurs to enable them participate effectively in energy planning, delivery and use.
3. **Create new financing and credit facilities** dedicated to women's sustainable energy activities, in order to promote a greater social equity. Multilateral and bilateral development sources such as the World Bank and the regional development banks should support energy access projects through instruments such as grants and concessional loans specifically targeting women entrepreneurs. Similarly, the private sector should support energy access projects through instruments, such as equity and debt financing targeting this group. Several ARE members are already implementing business models integrating women as agents of change.
4. **Building business models for women.** Women have a measurable, positive impact on their community and can drive purchasing power growth. When securing additional income, women are more likely to reinvest in their community's quality of living. Women entrepreneurs have the potential to lower acquisition and servicing costs. Women have a role to play in management, operations, maintenance as well as distributors of energy access solutions.

Case study 2. Mlinda: Development of pico-grids in India and the involvement of women groups

Mlinda is developing decentralised village grids in India which couple domestic needs with those of small-scale farmers. Mlinda began by installing pico-grids owned by and shared between five to ten households. This model implemented 300 grids, with 90 kW of installed capacity. It evolved to a modular pay-per-use system to meet growing demand and

a larger scale. This metered model gives people flexibility to pay according to their energy needs, whether domestic or farm related. Confident in the knowledge that they only pay for what they consume, users are willing to buy energy they are consuming. In this process, Mlinda relies on women groups to generate additional income to make them affordable. Mlinda loans to women groups for purchase of an electric rice-milling machine and trains them to maintain it and manage the business around it. Women earn a monthly income, repay their loan and become natural advocates for clean energy in their community.

3. Gender mainstreaming to understand women's practical needs

Gender mainstreaming and analysis are needed to evaluate the different impacts that policy decisions may produce on women and men. In some geographical contexts, there have been significant investments and efforts towards rural electrification. However, gender-disaggregated results are rarely captured, which does not allow to understand and analyse the degree of impact/effect by gender.

1. Set gender goals, and introduce and use **gender-differentiated indicators** when designing and implementing energy access programs.
2. **Regular and objective measurement of progress towards gender goals and the impact of gender-based energy access programmes**, which will hold donors, governments, and implementing organisations accountable for their outcomes. Tools for measurement include, for instance: empowerment indicators, household questionnaires and surveys, expert interviews, focus group discussions, as well as gender budgeting in national and local government procedures.
3. **Support data gathering to better understand women's practical and productive needs as well as strategic interests.** This is very geography-specific and involves gathering data on the gender division of labour, women's access to and control over energy-related resources and women's energy needs. Data gathering will ultimately help identify how women can be instrumental in making energy projects more effective.