

# Why Gender Matters in Energy?

Sama Shrestha



*Gender equality, social inclusion and the empowerment of women and girls should be at the very core of energy programmes.*

Photo: Krishna Grill and Engineering Works Pvt. Ltd.

## Why is a focus on gender equality and women's empowerment important for Nepal's energy sector?

Nepal relies on various sources of energy, primarily on traditional energy (such as firewood, agricultural residues, etc.) and then on commercial energy (such as petroleum, natural gas, electricity and coal, etc.). Nepal has great potential for renewable energy (hydro, solar, wind power) which is a more sustainable energy source but thus far its use has been very low. The consumption of traditional, commercial and renewable fuel sources in Nepal is 69 per cent, 28 per cent and 3 per cent respectively (Ministry of Finance, 2018).

Due to the prescribed gender roles women are the primary users and manager of energy within households. At the household level, fuelwood and biomass is the primary source of energy and is mostly used for cooking, lighting, preparing animal food and space heating. In several parts of country, women spend significant time in the collection of traditional fuel such as fuelwood for cooking and heating. Due to this, women are unable to engage in more productive economic activities.

In this context, access to modern source of energy including renewable energy for cooking and other productive use becomes critical for the socio-economic upliftment of women. There is evidence that improved tools and technologies and increased access to modern sources of energy such as improved cooking devices, liquified petroleum gas (LPG),

biogas and electrical appliances has significant positive impacts on women's lives. It can reduce the time used for domestic chores and unpaid household work, lessen drudgery and reduce health related risks issues thereby enabling them to seek paid employment, meet agriculture and income generating needs, run micro-enterprises, etc. In Nepal, however women have relatively less access to improved energy tools and technologies.

Further, women continue to be excluded from decision-making on energy. Their engagement in shaping energy policies, plans and programme remains at a minimum. In Nepal, energy plans, policies and programs have by and large remained gender-neutral. Our current policies do not pay adequate attention to the key role that women play in the energy sector both as managers and users; or reflect their specific priorities, concerns and interests. The recently endorsed 2019 Nepal Government White Paper on the status and future prospect for energy, water resources and Irrigation (2018) too does not consider gender specific needs and priorities.

For Nepal to achieve its sustainable and inclusive development goals, it is crucial that gender equality and women's empowerment is mainstreamed in energy plans, policies and program, with the objective of promoting women in the higher-value energy chain. It is fundamental that women are able to participate in and influence decision

making processes related to energy (requiring e.g. capacity development in technical functions, making organizations and individuals more gender aware and sensitive etc.).

We also need to recognize the critical role women play in the post natural disaster and conflict for recovery and building resilience. Therefore, it is imperative that women's energy needs are upgraded with improved energy efficient devices for cooking, drying, heating and lighting as we lay out recovery plans and programmes. Women have a key role to play in supporting sustainable and inclusive community development, including as entrepreneurs. In line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) principle of Leaving no One Behind (LNOB), women are also better equipped to reach out to other women, including those from excluded groups, to generate awareness about improved energy solutions and its positive impacts on their lives.

Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in the energy sector will require reform in the current energy policies and programmes. We need to understand the barriers and challenges different vulnerable groups (including gender and sexual minorities, people living with disability) face in participating in or benefitting from the energy sector; and accordingly, reform/formulate policies that recognize and respond to the differential needs of Nepal's diverse groups with regards to energy and related technologies.

## What are the key challenges faced by women in energy sector in Nepal?

One of the key challenges faced by women and girls, especially in rural and remote areas of Nepal is the disproportionate burden of domestic and unpaid work. Almost 74 per cent<sup>1</sup> of households are dependent on traditional energy sources with use leaves, wood, twigs and dung for fuel. On an average, women spend 3-5 hours a day collecting water and fuelwood to meet their daily needs<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, they spend significant amount of time on domestic chores. Evidence shows that women face climate change related risks wherein they must walk greater distances to gather firewood, which adds to their hardships and drudgery. Further, women often face increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) when they travel far from home, in the jungle, in the buffer zones<sup>3</sup> and in the protected areas in search of fuel and fodder.

The lack of access to clean water and modern energy resources is another major challenge increasing women's unpaid and care burden and limiting their ability to engage in productive activities such as education and income generation. Beside this, increased exposure to indoor smoke pollution from less efficient traditional cooking devices in poorly ventilated kitchen has serious implications on women's health as they spend hours in front of such stoves.

1 The recently endorsed Nepal Government White Paper on the status and future prospect for energy, Water resources and Irrigation (2019)

In addition, women are rarely involved in decision making with regard to the procurement or use of energy related technologies, including renewable energy-based technologies such as solar home systems, biogas, lanterns, cooking devices. Further, they also have limited access to finance and lack skill required for the development of energy-based enterprises as financial institutions demand collateral which most women are unable to provide.

This is one of the primary reasons why women continue to remain at the lower end of the energy value chain, as very few women are able to own and lead energy-based enterprises.

Women continue to be under-represented both at the policy and decision-making level, as well as in the work force (energy power plants, solar, wind, industries, business houses). They also have limited access to training opportunities, and therefore lack awareness, knowledge, technical skills about renewable energy solutions.

Prevalent gender norms and discrimination gender roles therefore undermine the ability of women and girls to fully participate and lead in the energy sector.. Nepal's energy and water policies and plans are yet to take these issues into consideration. These barriers exist not just in the policy and legal framework, but also in the institutions and programs of energy and water sectors (CRT/N, 2018).

## What is binding Nepal legally to mainstream Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Energy sector?

In line with the new Constitution, the national development plan (14th Plan and now the Approach Paper to the 15th Plan) has prioritized the integration of gender equality and women's empowerment in all development efforts. Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development especially Goal 5 (gender equality and empowerment of women and girls), and SDG 7 (ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all) lay emphasis on building and sustaining inclusive institutions and systems. Several international normative framework have emphasized the need to mainstream gender in the energy sector, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People; the International Labor Organization Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, 1989 (No. 169); the Convention on the

2 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/Fabs/pii/S1364032111002619>

3 Buffer zones have been announced in 13 wildlife reserves and national parks so far in Nepal as decided by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. Buffer zones are areas created to enhance the protection of a specific conservation area, often peripheral to it. Within buffer zones, resource use may be legally or customarily restricted, often to a lesser degree than in the adjacent protected area so as to form a transition zone.

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by Nepal in 1991; the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) 1995; and the International Conference on Population and Development +10. Recognizing that access to and use of energy by women greatly impacts other development priorities, the CEDAW Committee has explicitly recommended the need to focus on energy related issues in order to advance the rights of rural women.<sup>4</sup>

The Government of Nepal (GoN) has formulated several policies such as Rural Energy Policy (2006), Subsidy Policy (2016), Biomass Energy Strategy (2017), National Energy Efficiency Strategy (2018). Recently it has also issued White Paper on the status and future prospect for energy, Water resources and Irrigation (2019). With the transition towards federalism, the GoN is planning to develop new acts and regulations namely Water Resource Act, Electricity Act, Alternative Energy Act, Energy Efficiency Act, the White Paper of the Ministry of Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation (2019). These policies aim to support the implementation of renewable energy programmes and projects aimed at promoting the use of clean energy, especially electrical energy to fulfill the goal of clean energy for all by 2030. To facilitate this, government institutions at the provincial and local level and private sector and development partners have been engaged. However, the current policies and programs do not adequately address gender issues.

As mentioned earlier, it is imperative that the Government consider reviewing and amending all energy policies and plans from a gender perspective, to identify and address the key gender-specific barriers faced by women at the household or community level and in their enterprises. There is a need to adopt multi-sectoral approaches, considering, different types/nature of gender inequality/discriminations faced by women in accessing, making decisions and using energy. Active engagement and leadership of women's group, gender and sexual minorities, women with disabilities, youth groups, dalit, indigenous group and vulnerable groups in gender-responsive energy policy-making and implementation is critical for the successful implementation of all energy policies and programs. Therefore, we need to ensure significant political commitment and investment to mainstream gender in the energy sector, if we must ensure Access to Energy to All by 2030 and SDGs specially Goal-7 and Goal-5 (gender equality).

## What are your recommendations to mainstream Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in Energy Sector?

To address the key issues that I have mentioned, it is critical that Nepal's Energy Sector considers list of the following recommendations:

- » **Conduct assessment to identify barriers** related to why women are under-represented in the energy value chain, both at the policy, decision-making level and in the work force.
- » **Conduct analysis of energy-related policies from a GESI perspective**, since the GoN is committed to gender mainstreaming across its programmes and plans.
- » **Make energy sector more inclusive** by recognizing needs, priorities and capacities of, diverse groups considering factors such as gender, age, disability, caste, ethnicity, religion etc. Take into consideration of multiple forms of discrimination that are faced by women in accessing and using energy. Integrate this understanding across energy policies and programme and ensure the active participation and leadership of women, excluded and vulnerable groups in decision making.
- » **Incorporate gender equality into all energy programmes**, including gender balance and diversity in stakeholders' meetings, training of staff on GESI in sustainable energy.
- » **Invest in developing women's leadership capacity, strengthen women's agency and create an enabling environment** to strengthen their active and substantive role in energy sector, at all levels. Engage women in framing renewable energy plans and policies.
- » **Promote women's productive use of sustainable energy:** Enhance women's access to sustainable time- and labour-saving infrastructure in agriculture and micro-enterprises (e.g. access to clean water and energy) and climate-smart agricultural technology.
- » **Strengthen women's agency for promoting energy technologies** that would provide a range of business models where women act as agents of change in accessing clean energy. The provision of appropriate energy technologies reduces women's unpaid and care time burden; and increases their efficiency and productivity, including freeing up more time to take up paid work.
- » **Effectively address and respond to gender-based and sexual violence**, and any type of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. Gender responsive energy programmes should ensure safe, bias-free working environments that attract, retain and promote women's engagement in the energy sector, be it in policy-making or in private sector.
- » **Address discriminatory social norms and harmful practices** (such as menstruation-based discrimination, mobility restriction, unequal gender division of labor, gender gaps in control of resources, gender gaps in leadership and decision making, wage rate disparity etc.) through women's participation in planning and implementation of energy programmes. For example, if a woman does not touch or operate energy efficient tools or technologies four days a month due to her menstrual

4 The CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No. 34

practice, it's economic loss for the community and country too.

- » **Establish and regularly update gender specific information at the national and local level, including collection of qualitative and quantitative data, inclusion** of gender specific indicators across energy programmes, development of gender profiles in energy sector and socio-economic baselines for evidence-based energy policy making.
- » **Invest in clean energy alternatives** such as electrical cooking (induction cookers) solar home systems, and solar and hydraulic ram pumps for increased access to water for drinking and farming especially in the hills and mountains. The opportunity for sustainable energy entrepreneurship, therefore, is quite significant for women and vulnerable groups for increased access to safe water, improved sanitation and affordable and reliable energy.
- » **Apply Gender Responsive Budgeting principle** to ensure adequate allocation and investment in gender, monitoring of actions and increase in funds specifically targeting women's needs and interests regarding energy.
- » **Improve access to finance and financial intermediation services** for women-led energy-based enterprises (e.g. direct and directed lending, credit enhancement mechanisms, capacity development for commercial and development banks, micro finance development banks, cooperatives, integrated web-based platforms and challenge funds). Encourage banks and finance institutions to make available investment for purchase of energy technologies equally to both men and women for their household and commercial uses for developing business models and economic enterprise development.
- » **Enhance coordination on gender and energy related initiatives:** Nepal lacks a strong coordination mechanism on Gender and Energy sector at all levels (national, provincial and local). Such coordination mechanisms should strongly influence changes in policy and strengthen GESI responsiveness in the energy sector.
- » **Promote right to information.** Many appropriate and clean energy technologies have been promoted by Government of Nepal through a subsidy model. Various subsidy provisions are in place to promote renewable

energies but women especially in rural and remote areas lack access to such subsidy and incentives. Energy policies and programmes should focus on promoting right to increased awareness and information related to energy technologies and its use.

- » **Strengthen use of gender frameworks/tools:** The frameworks like "Gender at Work Framework" (<https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>) can be used by organization working in the energy sector to uncover opportunities and barriers to gender equality in energy sector, to map out strategy for change and to guide efforts to make progress. (<https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>). Similarly, "Gender and Age Marker" ([www.iascgenderwithagemarker.com](http://www.iascgenderwithagemarker.com)) is an easy-to-use, automated tool to increase gender and age responsive programming. This was used specially for humanitarian programme but can also be used for development programme.

*The Gender Energy and Water Network (GEWNet) was established in Nepal as an output of the National Consultative Workshop held in August 2002. It was initiated with support from ENERGIA, International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy. The network hosted by Centre for Rural Technology, Nepal (CRT/N) is currently a partner of Green and Inclusive Energy (GIE) Programme, which is financially supported by ENERGIA/Hivos. In Nepal, CRT/N has worked as a lead organization that has implemented the programme with policy support from the Alternative Energy Promotion Centre (AEPCC), and in partnership with National Association of Community Electricity Users Nepal (NACEUN), Indoor Air Pollution and Health Forum (IAPHF), Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), Renewable Energy Consideration of Nepal (RECoN) and Practical Action Nepal.*

*This network focuses on specific lobby and advocacy for promoting clean energy for men, women, and marginalized groups for both domestic and productive uses. It also contributes to the initiatives of the Government of Nepal related to*

- » *Clean Cooking Solutions for All (CCS4All) by 2030*
- » *Sustainable Development Goals (UN declaration) and*
- » *Objectives and targets outlined in the Energy White Paper*



#### **About the Author:**

Ms. Sama Shrestha is currently working as Programme Specialist (Women, Peace and Security, and Humanitarian and Disaster Risk Reduction) at UN Women Nepal. From CRT/N, Ms. Namuna Bhoomi Shrestha, GEWNet Coordinator spoke to Ms. Shrestha on how women's access to renewable energy can be improved in Nepal and how to mainstream gender in energy sector in Nepal.