



# Energy Access and Gender in India: Policy Brief

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## INTRODUCTION

The connection between equity in energy access and developmental aspects like poverty reduction, health and wellbeing is today well understood. Responding to this, energy access policies and programmes in India have tried to address gender equity within energy access, but much of this effort has failed to create a transformational impact.

Until 2018, 680 million people in India still relied on biomass as their primary cooking fuel (International Energy Agency, 2018). By 2019, targeted schemes like Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) had successfully delivered 80 million household LPG connections (International Energy Agency, 2020). Similarly, universal electricity access has been an area of focus for the Government of India, with over 95% of households connected to grid power by 2019 (International Energy Agency, 2020), and near universal electrification achieved by the end of 2020 (Press Information Bureau, 2020).

Schemes like SAUBHAGYA, for universal electricity connection to households, the Integrated Energy Policy (2006) and Rural Electrification Policy identify women as beneficiaries and participants within supply chains. Several state electricity policies also mention women as a targeted sector.

Despite these efforts, and recent policy support (Niti Aayog, 2017), challenges and gaps coupled with poor implementation strategies on the ground have been seen as major barriers to delivering gender equity in access to energy in practice. This research examines these gaps and challenges through interviews with 20 Indian experts from diverse backgrounds and regions engaged at various levels within the energy sector. Some of the policy challenges and recommendations that emerged from the interviews are noted below.

## CHALLENGES

1. 'Misrecognition' within international/national policy frameworks of intersectional vulnerabilities (e.g. overlaps of caste and gender) increases gaps in equitable energy access.
2. Energy access is still evaluated on 'connectivity' rather than where energy is needed and how. Specific energy needs, for example, energy for incubators in Public Health Centres (PHCs) or for domestic labour-saving appliances, are yet to be clearly identified.
3. Policies often allocate energy based on location of users, rather than nature of usage, ignoring traditional relationships between habitation and commerce, where life and livelihoods co-exist at scales larger than home-based livelihoods.
4. While some energy policies have started recognising women participants<sup>1</sup>, most still imagine women solely as consumers of household energies. Further, patchy implementation methods fail to deliver real and quantifiable gender equity improvements on the ground.
5. Many energy policies avoid a gender-identified approach, and do not collect gender-disaggregated data, thus ignoring gender inequities within access, usage and benefits as well as wider developmental inequities like poverty reduction or health impacts on women<sup>2</sup>.
6. The shift towards more grid connectivity has been at the expense of a weakened decentralised system, thus shifting control and power over energy delivery from consumers to suppliers and further marginalising women stakeholders.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

For public policy frameworks at national, international and state levels:

1. **End user diversity** must be integral to all energy policies. Attempts by some programmes to address the role of women beyond mere consumers of energy need to be universalised and strengthened by clear systems of implementation. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) parameters must incorporate gender disaggregated impact assessment data to clearly capture equity delivery on the ground.
2. **Diversity of households** needs to become a systemic part of all policy frameworks, giving equal attention to diverse households, including women-led households, trans people's homes, migrant worker groups, informal 'blue tarp' settlements, or single parents in shared living.
3. **Gender capacity building and equal gender representation** must be an integral part of all policy design to overcome historic disadvantages women have faced within science and technology fields and wealth access and ownership.
  - a. Policies should ensure equal women's participation at all levels, by making such measures mandatory quantitative deliverables. Affirmative action, like quantitative gender diversity of boards, needs to be designed into implementation frameworks.
  - b. Gender training should be an integral part of all personnel development and staff training at all levels.
4. **Appropriate and effective gender budgeting** within all energy policies needs to clearly dedicate project funds for gendered needs, like capacity training of women, or on-site safe housing and toilets, and impact assessment of projects monitoring the effective utilisation of such budgets thus reducing implementation gaps for gender equity.
5. **Conventional financial structures must adopt gender-aware lending policies** to ensure gender equity in an investment heavy sector like energy.
6. **Collaboration across energy and other development departments** like Health, Pollution, Education and Social Justice is required to address specific energy needs, e.g., for smart classrooms, or incubators in PHCs

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1 The Rural Electrification Policy (2006) 'encourages women's participation' and the Integrated Energy Policy (2006) promotes participation by women's groups in taking up franchises through Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana/Rural Electrification Programme.

2 Only 4 out of 14 policies on electrification reviewed by Govindan et al (2020) mention women separately.

**For Electricity Distribution Companies (DISCOMs) and Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs):**

- 1. Gender equal participation within supply chains** should be ensured to leverage women's skills, e.g., to support "last mile" connectivity in energy delivery.
- 2. Participation structures** should be designed to encourage equal women's participation while understanding women's needs e.g., physical and training needs, infrastructure like toilets, weight of machinery or height of utilities. Mixed gender work groups can produce holistic energy delivery solutions.
- 3. Domestic energy delivery systems** should ensure messaging is gender inclusive, while identifying women as the principal beneficiaries, to ensure a collective household-level support for investment in energies to address household drudgery, or clean cooking fuels.<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup> Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) is a central government programme which targets women as the principal beneficiaries for clean cooking fuel (LPG household level connection), which was given freely to all targeted households. It is evidenced by operators within the sector that including the men of the household within awareness campaigns, especially on family level health benefits, provided greater success in delivery of this fuel, than when targeting women alone.

