

## The intersection of gender parity, energy access and forced displacement: Women's energy needs and experiences

Note from the *Global Platform for Action (GPA) on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings to Women Energize Women*

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### Background Information

The world faces a growing humanitarian challenge: as of the start of 2022, over 102 million people are projected to be forcibly displaced from their homes ([UNHCR, 2022](#)). This is a growing crisis, with over 21 million people forced over borders as refugees and 52 million people displaced internally within their own countries. The current Ukraine crisis drives these figures up daily. The number of globally displaced people is predicted to continue rising substantially over the coming years, with the increasing adverse effects of climate change, the continued impacts of COVID-19, and forced migration due to armed conflicts.

Energy access is critically important in displacement contexts and humanitarian settings. Refugees and displaced people need electricity for their homes and businesses, to power their community facilities, and to support the activities of locally-based humanitarian institutions ([GPA 2021](#)). Without access to energy, displaced people are unable to have electricity for their livelihood activities, to work or study at night, or to navigate their communities safely after dark ([UNHCR, 2019](#)). Displaced people cannot become autonomous or self-reliant without access to modern energy resources and solutions.

The vast majority of the world's displaced people do not have access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern sources of energy. An estimated 94% of displaced people in camps do not have access to electricity and an estimated 81% rely on firewood and charcoal for cooking ([GPA, 2022](#)). Millions of displaced people across the globe live in the dark, in highly polluted settings, unable to access basic electricity services or sustainable cooking solutions.

The Global Platform for Action (GPA) on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings (GPA), hosted at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) was established in 2018 to enable increased access to sustainable energy solutions in displacement settings. Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal 7, the GPA is guided by the vision that: *“every person affected by conflict or natural disaster and their hosts have access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy services by 2030.”* Its mission is to equip all stakeholders with the capacity to mainstream sustainable energy solutions into programming and implementation, with the goal of delivering improved protection, dignity, and energy related social, environmental, and economic benefits to displaced people ([GPA, 2018](#)).

The GPA strives to remove barriers to energy access in humanitarian settings by providing a collaborative agenda for energy, development, and humanitarian partners to deliver concrete actions of Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG 7) for displacement contexts. The [GPA Coordination Unit](#) galvanises collective action towards the GPA's realization. It is understood that without substantial investment and decisive political action, Sustainable Development Goal 7 is highly unlikely to be achieved in displacement contexts by 2030. To cover all refugee energy needs globally (not including the needs of migrant and IDP populations or asylum seekers) between 2022 and 2030 would require over US\$ 10 billion.

## Energy-Gender-Humanitarian Nexus

Humanitarian systems are increasingly moving to provide energy access through sustainable sources. Sustainable and clean energy can provide significant benefits associated with gender equality, food security, water, sanitation, health, education, livelihoods, connectivity, and environmental protection. While to some extent, humanitarian action on prioritizing energy-gender issues has been limited, some initial progress is being made. Global practitioners are beginning to address these humanitarian-energy-gender capacity gaps collaboratively, focusing on establishing opportunities for transformative impact for communities living through crises, especially for women and girls. Recent evidence suggests a number of key issues connecting energy and gender:

- Access to energy enables women and girls to gain greater control over their lives and futures, especially by reducing the time and physical burdens of collecting firewood (and other biomass), improving the sense of security at night, and improved maternal healthcare. Cleaner cooking fuels and systems can reduce indoor pollution and fire-related hazards whilst improving nutrition and overall quality of life ([IIED, 2020](#)).

### *Gender and Energy: Energy for cooking*

- Many people in displacement settings cook over three-stone fires using firewood or other biomass. Firewood collection in sub-Saharan Africa can take up to 15 hours per week per household and is often undertaken by women and girls ([NRC, 2021](#)). Hazardous indoor air from firewood stoves is a significant global health problem, causing disproportionate respiratory disease in women and children, as they are most often those tending to the meal preparation. Globally, close to 4 million people die prematurely each year from illness attributable to household air pollution from inefficient cooking practices using polluting stoves, solid fuels, and kerosene ([WHO, 2021](#)).
- [Evidence shows](#) intersections between energy access in displacement settings and violence against women and girls. Poor lighting in camps and the assumption that women and girls will collect firewood are both factors that heighten their exposure and risks to potential violence. Improved lighting, the provision of firewood alternatives, and establishing income-generating opportunities for women can help reduce risks of the exposure of women and girls to gender-based violence ([UNHCR, 2015](#)).

### *Gender and Energy: Electricity for health*

- Installing solar energy or other electrification services to health posts improves the availability of clinical services, such as sterilising equipment, cool chain for vaccination, or simply light 24/7. Among the largest surgical procedures undergone in health posts in displacement contexts are caesarean sections. For facilities without adequate and reliable energy access (the majority of health posts in displacement settings), the majority of these procedures undertaken during the night are guided by cell-phone and torch light.

### *Gender and Energy: The call for more gender inclusive planning*

- Though the case for focusing on energy-gender in emergencies is becoming increasingly clearer for energy experts, humanitarian (and other) practitioners lack standardized guidance on how to effectively prepare for, design, and implement programs that address the humanitarian-energy-gender nexus. Energy programming, from design to implementation, needs to embody a gender-sensitive inclusive approach ([Mercy Corps, 2019](#)) ([Practical Action, 2018](#)). Working directly with women to develop cleaner, more reliable energy solutions is key. Given gender norms in many contexts however, female humanitarian workers may be best placed to support local women in having their respective needs met. Stakeholders recognise the need for a holistic approach to developing energy solutions for displacement contexts, mindful of important gender and socio-economic considerations, yet many interventions continue to be technology-focused.
- Capacity building amongst displaced women and girls is essential in the pursuit of achieving SDG7 for displacement settings. Female-led initiatives and female energy-entrepreneurs are leading the humanitarian energy sector in some of the most promising energy access projects for displacement settings ([NRC, 2021](#)).

### *Gender and Energy: Award winning project example from Yemen*

As an example of such gender inclusive action within humanitarian energy, Iman Hadi, an entrepreneur from Yemen’s rural north lead a group of 10 women, with support from the [Supporting Resilient Livelihoods and Food Security in Yemen Joint Programme](#) and the Sustainable Development Foundation, to install a solar power plant providing clean energy for residents in her community in Abs. Hadi provided an alternative to the expensive and harmful diesel-generated power that so many households in her community were unable to afford. In March 2021, Hadi’s solar power plant provided affordable energy for 43 households. The men in the village that were previously opposed to women working outside of their homes are now encouraging and supporting Hadi’s activities. Hadi is determined to continue inspiring Yemeni women to seize equal opportunities in all areas of life ([UNDP, 2020](#)).

### *Gender and Energy: Listening to the voices of refugees*

Energy is vitally important to displaced women. As Joelle Hangi, a refugee living in Kenya shares, “The fact that access to food is a basic need that one has to respond to, women in refugee camps are forced to sacrifice themselves including the development of their career and future to respond to the current needs of the family. This is a situation that makes women more dependent and vulnerable. Inadequate source of energy for cooking is something affecting refugees from their childhood and continues throughout the time that they have to stay in the camps. Collecting firewood is a labour-intensive task that cannot be afforded by a single hand. This situation pushes young girls to bring their hand of support as well. Earlier involvement of girls in house chores and subjected to the search for energy. This situation affects girls awfully to the point of not performing well at school and even dropping out of school.”

