

Engendering Energy and Empowering Women in the Himalayan Region

Some critical issues and options

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The wellbeing of mountain people in the Himalayas, especially women, depends on energy and water – the two most essential resources for human survival. These resources are becoming increasingly scarce due to poverty, population pressure, changing climate, and inappropriate development interventions. As a result, women and children are facing a greater and disproportionate workload because of the traditional gender-based divisions of labour.

With increasing water and fuel related work burdens, women have no time to participate in new livelihood opportunities. Women also face a variety of health hazards from carrying heavy loads and cooking for long hours in a smoky environment. Interventions need to empower women to meet their energy and water needs, improve their wellbeing, and reduce poverty and environmental degradation.

This paper aims to offer some future strategic options based on the learning from projects implemented by ICIMOD in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas during the last decade.

Learning from the ground

With support from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), ICIMOD launched a project on 'Capacity building of women for energy and water management in the rural areas of the Himalayas', through national partners at sites in Bhutan, India, and Nepal. The aim was to enable women to plan and implement household water and energy

initiatives. The project would build their capacity to organise, and identify and prioritise their own practical needs to free themselves from excessive drudgery and long hours spent collecting water and fuel. The time saved would allow them to increase their income (productive needs) and improve their status in society (strategic needs).



The project followed a 'learning by doing approach' based on gender-aware participatory action research. Based on their prioritised needs, women were at the forefront of designing and implementing environmentally friendly, pro-poor, and drudgery-reducing technologies – mainly improved cooking stoves, solar dryers, solar lanterns, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), rainwater harvesting tank, recharging traditional springs, and sprinkler and drip irrigation. As a support mechanism, the project provided seed money for the purchase of prioritised technologies and a revolving fund for credit needs for income generating activities .

"Women emerged as energy and water entrepreneurs and leaders."

In less than two years, the project made a marked difference in the lives of the women, their families, and their communities. Women realised multiple benefits from the pilot intervention: saved time and fuel, reduced drudgery, improved health, better education of children, productive use of saved time, improved decision-making power, built capacity, and an emerging sense of empowerment. Since current gender relations and resource conditions burden women in the rural Himalayas heavily, the practical needs of saving time and reducing drudgery made it possible for women to participate in new livelihood opportunities and improve their standing in society.

Women emerged as energy and water entrepreneurs and leaders – running an LPG depot and production and marketing of solar dryers in Bhutan, managing a technology demonstration village and marketing of improved cooking stoves in Nepal, and recharging a traditional spring by constructing micro reservoirs to trap and store rainwater in Uttarakhand, India. The project brought gradual change in the traditionally defined gender roles with women taking up so-called 'male responsibilities'

and men showing increased involvement in household chores previously considered as 'women's responsibility'.

The formation of women-only groups helped this process. In such groups, women felt comfortable to take charge of the technology instead of handing over control to men and being passive beneficiaries. Experience showed that patriarchal attitudes and initial resistance from men to women taking on new roles can be shifted, once the benefits to the household and for the whole community are clearly explained and demonstrated through gender sensitisation.

The immediate benefits of the technologies, the clear potential for their replication, and the enthusiasm of the participating women led local governments to mainstream this good practice into their own programmes.

Lessons learned

Focusing on women as a target group is essential to address energy issues. These targeted initiatives focused on women to enhance their capacity. They can create an empowering space for women and act as an important incubator for ideas and strategies that can later become mainstream interventions.



Having the right entry point is crucial to ensure women's participation and empowerment. Reducing the drudgery and workload of women, especially in energy and water related tasks, is a strong entry point for enabling women to participate in new livelihood opportunities and improve their standing in society. It gives more options to women to meet their productive and strategic gender needs in a sustainable way.

Supporting the organisational capacity building of women is fundamental to their empowerment. To change the subordinate position of women and confront the existing power relations, it is necessary to create an enabling environment at the top, mobilise women at the bottom, support women's individual and organisational capacity building, and create economic opportunities.

Removing information barriers for the promotion of technologies is critically important. Given the mass illiteracy and limited outreach of awareness programmes,



many rural women are unaware of energy efficient and drudgery reducing technologies suited to their needs. Women are better able to make their own choices from a range of technological options if information is easily available and an enabling environment is created to make technologies locally available, affordable, and acceptable.

Using a participatory bottom up approach can anchor good practice to national programmes.

The pilot project in Nepal demonstrated how a good practice at the micro level can become anchored in the ongoing national level programmes at the meso level through a participatory bottom up approach. This can be a powerful strategy to put demand pressure on district level governments for its replication and to provide a basis for policy dialogue at the central level.

Finding sustainable energy solutions calls for addressing the three criteria of sustainability- availability, affordability, and acceptability. Besides addressing women's needs, properly designed renewable energy options must pass these three criteria to both mitigate and adapt to climate change and create a win-win opportunity for sustainable development.

Energy provision is not merely technology provision.

The basic issue is not providing technologies suited to women. It is more important to empower them by building their capabilities and creating economic opportunities so that they can have a voice in decisions that are made regarding their energy choices.

Conclusion

Throughout the Himalayan region, clean and energy efficient technologies that reduce the heavy burden of women by saving labour and reducing drudgery must be at the centre of the national poverty reduction strategies. The water and energy interventions must be integrated and implemented using an empowering approach in order to ensure their sustainability.

The question is how to enable women to choose the option(s) that best meet their practical, productive, and strategic needs. From a policy perspective, this calls for addressing the twin challenges of empowering women and engendering water and energy. However, for water and energy to become an instrument for successful poverty alleviation and sustainable mountain development, there must be a drastic change in the existing approach and fundamental readjustments of public policies.

The roles and needs of women must be integral to the decision-making process of a decentralised and efficient system. This is both a technical and a political process. It will require a shift in organisational cultures and ways of thinking, the promotion of gender goals (welfare, efficiency, equity, and empowerment), adequate enabling structures, and positive discrimination in resource allocations.

References

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