



# Understanding the links between energy, poverty and gender

*Dr Hilary Standing, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9RE Tel: +44 (0)1273 877147; Fax: +44 (0)1273 691647 Email: H.Standing@ids.ac.uk*

## Introduction

To explore the relationships between energy, poverty and gender two related aspects can be distinguished:

- poverty and gender
- gender and energy

## Poverty and gender

Poor women and poor men do not necessarily become poor in the same ways through the same processes – nor do they save money for when times are hard in the same ways. The impact of migration on poor rural areas is a particularly clear example of this. Whilst able-bodied men may move to work in other rural or urban areas (sometimes sending money home), women may be left managing both food production and household-based work. Increasingly women are the heads of households, with too much work to do and too few resources – leaving them vulnerable.

Within the household, women and men will have different access to goods and resources. Data from households may reveal hidden discrimination based on gender or age. Because of the different ways in which both women and men experience poverty, a person's status within the family is one factor which should be considered in determining poverty reduction strategies.

There has been a tendency to equate men with production-based needs and women with welfare-based needs. An analysis of poverty, based on gender, should not just look at welfare needs for women, but also address both women's and men's capacity to access ways of gaining an income.

## Gender and energy

There is a relationship between the sexual division of labour and the reliance of the poor on traditional energy sources. The division of labour affects women and men, boys and girls differently. Women generally work in both productive activities and in tasks associated with child-rearing,

### Comprendre les liens entre énergie, pauvreté et genre.

Les stratégies de réduction de la pauvreté diffèrent selon le genre. Les comportements ainsi que le rapport avec l'énergie ne sont pas les mêmes selon les genres. Les femmes sont impliquées aussi bien dans les activités productives que les tâches domestiques. Proportionnellement, l'utilisation de la biomasse et son impact sur la santé touchent plus de femmes que d'hommes. Quoique les tâches pénibles soient généralement effectuées par les femmes, la mécanisation de certaines tâches peut affecter leurs revenus si les équipements échappent à leur contrôle. Une politique effectivement centrée sur la pauvreté doit considérer en priorité les revenus, la sécurité et le renforcement des capacités.

food processing and cooking, care of the sick and caring for the house. Girls are more likely than boys to provide support in these tasks. The poorer the household, the greater the time, and the physical and health burdens associated with these tasks. The absence of basic labour saving devices and 'clean' technologies – such as fuel-efficient stoves – not only burdens poor women in these ways, but also prevents them from doing other productive activities. The disproportionately high levels of ill-health experienced by women, girls and young children caused by traditional biomass stoves is a further consequence of the division of labour.

Women and girls also work in production, often as unpaid family labour in physically arduous and/or time consuming tasks such as food processing for local markets. The greater the differences in men's and women's activities in rural areas, the greater the drudgery for women and girls. A similar pattern is found in income generating activities; women generally have less access to ways of making an income, such as labour, loan guarantees, credit facilities, information and training. These inequalities stem from household, social and cultural discrimination. Hence, women's capacity to increase their labour productivity and improve their incomes is limited.

It has also been pointed out that because of their reliance on 'traditional' industries, women's employment can be threatened by the introduction of more efficient forms of energy. For example, in Bangladesh,

the replacement of traditional paddy huskers operated by women, with small-scale mechanised milling has reduced the number of poor women earning income in this field significantly – men have largely taken the jobs in milling. This case underlines the need to analyse energy-related impacts on the poor in ways that show the effects on women and men.

Because of their different and unequal roles in the division of labour, women and men have different needs and may have different priorities and make different trade-offs of their time and energy. For example, Dutta found that women valued smoke reduction on health grounds and to reduce the drudgery entailed in cleaning smoky pots. Men, on the other hand, valued fuel savings above other considerations. 'Community' level interventions need to take particular note of this. It is important to look at who speaks for communities, how decision making takes place, and to ensure that the voices of minorities and women have been heard.

The energy chapter in the World Bank's draft PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) Toolkit explicitly recognises these themes. While making little reference to gender, its energy-poverty framework highlights income, capability, security and empowerment as the key elements required of a poverty-focused energy policy.

*Hilary Standing is a social scientist working on development issues in the Health and Social Change Programme, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex*