

Understanding the Interaction between Gender, Energy, and Forced Displacement

The bottom line. Women bear the greatest burden from energy poverty, and forced displacement further entrenches gender inequalities. This Live Wire aims to advance our understanding of how energy access can help bridge gender gaps in displaced settings to ensure equitable and true universal energy access for all. Energy is indispensable for powering economic opportunities and providing basic services—two key pathways out of poverty. Electrical connections alone will not suffice; women must have the capacity, tools, and resources they need to fulfill their potential in a severely constrained environment.

In displaced settings, can access to energy provide a pathway out of poverty for women and girls?

Yes, access to energy can provide opportunities for women to become economic agents and lift themselves out of poverty

Women bear the greatest burden from energy poverty, and forced displacement further entrenches gender inequalities. A 2018 progress review of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognized the nexus of gender and energy as fundamental to reaching gender equality (SDG 5) and the equal importance of women's role in achieving universal

energy access (SDG 7). Policy makers suggest integrating gender and energy actions within all SDGs, backed by gender-responsive global and national energy sector policies.¹

This Live Wire aims to advance our understanding of how energy access can help bridge gender gaps in displaced settings to ensure equitable and true universal energy access for all, leaving no one behind. Given the multidimensional nature and complexity of the topic, we explore the interconnections of three themes—gender, energy, and forced displacement—while providing guidance for future research. We also seek to inform the design of future sustainable energy programs so as to contribute to the achievement of gender-equitable outcomes. We ask what approaches will help “transform traditional gender roles and relations by empowering women through improved access to, or participation in the delivery of, modern energy services” (Clancy et al. 2019).

1. Energy here refers chiefly to the generation of electricity. The focus on electricity is due to its paramount role as a basic service.



Rutu Dave is a senior energy specialist at the World Bank and program lead for ESMAP's Leaving No One Behind program.



Barbara Ungari is an operations analyst at the World Bank and team member of ESMAP's Leaving No One Behind program.



Marco Indelicato is a senior energy access consultant at the World Bank Group.



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The nexus of gender, energy, and forced displacement has not been widely researched, and additional sex-disaggregated data and analysis are needed to advance understanding of the interactions among the three components. Such an analysis could help uncover the main drivers of deprivation and their correlation with energy access (and other basic services), endogenous and exogenous constraints, gender and social norms, technology, and policy and sector dynamics. It could also help identify sustainable solutions for empowering women's economic agency and thereby enabling them to find a way out of entrenchment.

Key terms used in this brief are defined in box 1.

Displaced women are at a significant disadvantage across a range of outcomes compared with their male counterparts and compared with women and men from host communities.

What are the constraints on economic empowerment of displaced women?

Preexisting inequalities, including in access to energy, become more entrenched when women and girls are forcibly displaced, often further undermining their livelihoods and limiting their potential

The World Bank's 2021 report on *Gender Dimensions of Forced Displacement (GDFD)* sheds new light on the deprivation that women and girls face in displacement settings. While the degree of integration of forcibly displaced people into a host country is highly conditioned by government policies and other exogenous factors, displacement significantly increases the likelihood of households being multidimensionally poor, with a compounding effect on gender equality. Displaced women are at a significant disadvantage across a range of outcomes compared with their male counterparts and compared with women and men from host communities. The gender gap also has significant effects on individual deprivation within households, with women less likely to have access to economic opportunities and basic services such as health care and education.

Box 1. Definitions of key terms

Agency. The capacity of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfill their potential.

Asylum seeker. A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments. In the event of a negative decision, the person must leave the country and may be expelled, as may any non-national in an irregular or unlawful situation, unless permission to stay is provided on humanitarian or other related grounds.

Displaced persons. People or groups of people who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed

conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters.

Internally displaced persons. Displaced persons who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

Refugee. A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

Sources: Barker 2005: 448; IDMC 2017; Khoudour and Andersson 2017 (citing international conventions).

Table 1. Key constraints on women in settings of forced displacement, with reference to the goals of economic opportunities and access to basic services

	Individual	Situational	Structural
Economic opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of education and vocational skills • Lack of identification or proper documentation • Gender and social norms • Few employment opportunities • Time scarcity for women heads of household • Scarce availability of childcare • Absence of networks and scarcity of social capital 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor mobility • Camp versus noncamp residency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constraining integration policies of host country • Limited employment opportunities • Difficulty of acquiring identification papers and work permits • Exclusion from financial system • Poor access to energy and digital infrastructure • Limited access to information and communications technology
Access to basic services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location dependent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor access to water and sanitation facilities • Scarce access to shelter • Limited access to food and nonfood items • Limited access to education and health services 	

Source: World Bank 2021.

The GDFD research delivers data demonstrating that among internally displaced persons, households with more women and children with an education are at decreased risk of poverty. However, substantial barriers, including limited education and heavy care responsibilities, constrain economic opportunities for displaced women (Klugman 2022).

Constraints to economic empowerment in circumstances of forced displacement can be classified as **individual, situational, or structural**, according to the Bank's GDFD report (table 1).² The first group includes constraints that are innate or acquired through socioeconomic factors out of the individual's control, while the second and third groups comprise

2. Making use of the Multidimensional Poverty Index, the GDFD report examines individual-level deprivations of women and men in forcibly displaced households by measuring levels of education, health, living standards, and financial security using 15 indicators that all pertain to economic opportunities and basic services. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/multidimensional-poverty-measure>

constraints influenced by exogenous factors. Structural constraints include policies; legal frameworks; and economic, social, and cultural factors that affect women's economic participation, decision-making roles, and voice and agency in host communities. Such constraints limit women's access to spaces (such as marketplaces), opportunities, and assets; employment; access to safe and reliable energy and digital infrastructure; financial services; and access to information and communications technology.

At the individual level, constraints limiting economic participation are based on human endowments such as education and vocational skills. Such constraints can influence how displaced women adjust to host communities, as women tend to be less educated and have fewer vocational skills than men. Other individual constraints include gender and social norms that limit opportunities to improve livelihoods. Traditional gender biases often make it difficult for women to seek employment in many contexts. Women who are heads of household have an added burden if they are displaced

and are also the breadwinner and caretaker of a family that includes children, people with disabilities, or elderly members.

Residence location is the prime example of a situational constraint, carrying both advantages and disadvantages for displaced women living in refugee camps (versus settlements) in terms of mobility, access to services, and other matters (World Bank 2021).

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How can access to energy provide an effective pathway out of poverty for displaced women?

Simply providing connections to electricity will not solve the problem

Beyond the displacement context, a lack of or limited access to energy affects the economic and social agency of women (and other vulnerable groups) significantly more than it does most men. Empowering women to maximize their use of energy after it has been provided requires a conducive ecosystem and the eradication of institutional norms plaguing the energy sector.

Because displacement exacerbates poor living conditions and well-being, providing access to reliable energy becomes even more critical for displaced women and vulnerable groups, and perhaps has an even greater positive impact in displacement situations.

Maier, Constant, and Ahmad (2020) analyze the interactions between gender and energy in situations marked by fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV) in the Middle East and North Africa and across three domains: household, community, and markets. Their research reveals that lack of access to reliable, affordable, and clean energy affects women's economic and social agency, "entrenching gender inequalities and widening [...] the gap between women and men in [...] education, health care, economic participations, voice and agency" (p. 41). Table 2 provides a snapshot of gender-related inequalities and vulnerabilities across the three domains in the FCV context.

Given the different roles, responsibilities, and voices of women and men within households, communities, and markets, "the impact and challenges of accessing and using energy services are gendered," affecting certain groups more than others (Yang 2020). In addition to the more direct impacts—health hazards from cooking indoors with biomass and using lighting solutions powered by kerosene, safety risks tied to firewood collection, poor nutrition levels, and compromised food safety from lack of refrigeration—other, less obvious gender-specific gaps include unequal time use, resulting in time poverty; loss of opportunities for political, economic, and social participation in education; and limited income-generation or entrepreneurial opportunities (Yang 2020).

Table 2. Gender-related inequalities and vulnerabilities in the FCV context

Household domain	Community domain	Market domain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy- and time-consuming household chores • Burden of finding alternative energy sources • Lack of knowledge of technology and energy efficiency • Disparity in decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited access to electricity hindering education and economic empowerment • Lack of street lighting affecting perception of insecurity • Increased vulnerability to threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subordination of women's needs in a male-dominated sector • Less access to finance for women

Source: Maier, Constant, and Ahmad 2020.

FCV = fragility, conflict, and violence.

It seems increasingly likely that the same energy services result in different social and economic outcomes for women and men, partly because of the disparity in their level of technical skills. Women have lower reading levels and less experience with hardware. They are generally “time poor” and will therefore respond differently to energy interventions. Clancy and his colleagues (2012) measured the effects of modern energy in households in terms of time, drudgery, well-being, and economic opportunities for women. They presented evidence of a correlation between energy and transformation in both women’s and men’s lives (although causality is more difficult to prove). Time use is key, and unproductive time use often results in women’s lost opportunities for political,

economic, and social participation and for education. Access to electricity may indeed save time on certain tasks, but how that time is used for the betterment of conditions is less clear.

The same is true for economic opportunities. Evidence suggests that electricity opens doors, such as the extension of working hours through lighting, access to productive technologies for start-ups, and other benefits; however, providing access alone is often not enough because women’s scope for responding to energy interventions is different and often more limited than men’s (Clancy et al. 2012). Changing that calculus is a central component of the World Bank’s Horn of Africa Initiative (box 2).

Box 2. Regional Integration for a Sustainable Energy Supply in the Horn of Africa

Health and education facilities in the borderlands of the Horn of Africa have limited access to electricity, significantly affecting the livelihoods of women, children, and other vulnerable groups.

As part of its efforts to promote regional integration and cooperation, the World Bank, under the Horn of Africa Initiative, plans to support the development of electricity access in the borderlands through its forthcoming HOA Regional Integration for Sustainable Energy Supply (HOA RISES) Project. Gender inequality is high in the covered countries, including Ethiopia, where women remain more vulnerable to risks owing to cultural norms and socioeconomic status. Productivity gaps in agriculture and unemployment rates for women are among the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa. The heavy social emphasis on the domesticity of women confines their responsibilities to tending to husband, children, and home.

Potential entry points for a gender-inclusive intervention have been identified, and a gender equality and social inclusion assessment of selected HOA countries will be commissioned to support project preparation, which will help prevent the exclusion of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, such as women, persons with

disabilities, internally displaced persons, and refugees, from energy access services, decision-making, and project benefits.

Entry points for women’s empowerment include support, awareness, and engagement to develop forms of income generation and linkages with productive uses of energy. Women’s participation should be planned in a visible manner and by actively involving them in the delivery of energy services, as well as by facilitating consultations with women about the day-to-day management of camps for displaced persons and related energy services. Service delivery will include a dialogue with host communities to ensure that the business models are politically acceptable. Such exchanges offer the opportunity for gender-informed communication using gender-sensitive language and visuals when disseminating knowledge. Service delivery will also include outreach activities targeted toward women to build skills for future employment.

Sources: Yang 2020; <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P174175>.

Women have always been underrepresented in the energy sector, both in private and public organizations and along the entire value chain, including in decision-making positions. This may explain why policies and interventions have traditionally been gender-blind—assuming all users benefit equally from increased access. Energy policy makers tend to be men; and public, private, and nongovernmental organizations are primarily run by men. This results in a male-dominated structure notable for creating bias and overlooking the needs of women and vulnerable groups. Expanding the engagement of women in the energy value chain could be the first necessary step toward developing a long-term solution for achieving energy equality.

Is universal energy access for forcibly displaced people achievable?

Although progress in access has been noticeable, significant challenges remain in ensuring all displaced people have access to basic services

No single solution exists to solve the energy crises faced by forcibly displaced people and to address the specific needs of individual groups. Outside of camps, displaced settings vary significantly. Most displaced people live either in informal settlements or in rented accommodations, in urban or rural settings, and with varying levels of access to energy. This adds a layer of complexity for policy makers and development stakeholders to consider when exploring how best to provide access to basic services and equally needed productive opportunities, especially for women.

Most refugees are hosted by developing countries—including some of the poorest in the world (OECD 2017). And many of those countries struggle to provide energy to their own populations. For these reasons, humanitarian and development actors have enlarged their perspective on the importance of energy in ensuring the well-being of refugees; they are now also considering the power infrastructure needs of the host country. This is evidenced by the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, which is adding significant pressure to an already constrained electricity system. Accordingly, the UNHCR 2019 Global Refugee Forum called for increased access to modern and clean energy for refugee and host communities (Maier, Constant, and Ahmad 2020).

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Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, with more than 1.5 million refugees, most living in 12 refugee-hosting districts located in some of the poorest and least-developed areas of the country. These areas lack adequate employment opportunities, health care services, education, and transportation infrastructure. Uganda lacks sufficient enabling infrastructure for electricity to provide adequate services to the refugee and host communities equally. Households average 1.5 light sources per family and rely on kerosene; just half of health centers and only 20 percent of schools have access to electricity services; and the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated an already critical situation. In response, the World Bank has proposed an International Development Agency credit to scale up sustainable energy solutions in the region for both refugee and host communities by addressing an array of multidimensional challenges beyond connection alone. The project will include gender-targeted interventions focused on addressing energy access for women-headed households and enterprises as well as access to finance. The emphasis will be on building awareness, fostering entrepreneurship, bolstering careers in the energy sector, and empowering women in refugee communities with universal transferable skills.

Connecting the dots: What does the intersection of gender, energy, and forced displacement reveal?

“Energy equity” can be a powerful enabler to empower women and vulnerable groups in displacement settings

First, viewing consumers as a homogenous group does not help. Access should not be evaluated based on connectivity but rather on where, how, and for whom access is needed. Gender-disaggregated data are essential to addressing this issue, especially in displacement contexts, because the impact and challenges of accessing and using energy services are gendered (Yang 2020).

Second, energy is indispensable for powering economic opportunities and providing basic services—two key pathways out of poverty. But connections will not be effective unless women sense their agency and have the capacity, tools, and resources they need to fulfill their potential in a severely constrained environment and to make the leap from victims to economic agents.

Third, sector reforms sensitive to these challenges are needed, both to mainstream gender in the methodology of energy projects and to break into a male-dominated sector and cultivate a more diverse, equitable, and receptive value chain. To provide the impetus for such reforms, additional research, data, and analysis are needed to gather more evidence of the benefits women can derive from access to energy.

In the meantime, how do we create social and economic agency? When correlating energy access with women's empowerment in contexts of forced displacement, it is essential to collect and learn from disaggregated data that recognize household diversity. These data can help loosen constraints and develop sustainable strategies that reach beyond simply providing access to modern energy, including supplying tools such as education and vocational skills, which can catalyze employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership. Vocational training targeted at refugee women “could yield significant gains not only on the beneficiaries but on the host economy; however, most educational, and vocational programs are traditionally designed for men” (World Bank 2021: 28).

Access to digital tools would contribute significantly to the economic participation and livelihoods of displaced women and girls; this would require building the underlying infrastructure and ensuring that an adequate power source is always available, while at the same time ensuring that technology is accessible to all. Owning or having access to information and communications technology (ICT) would facilitate the connection to capacity-building programs, especially during extreme events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. ICT products would help women access digital banking, paving the way to financial inclusion through cash transfers. Sourcing the technology itself may be challenging without proper national identification or documentation,

and displaced women and girls who obtain such certification are still less likely than men to use the technology owing to its costs and their lack of awareness of its life-enhancing capabilities (World Bank 2021). Countering these barriers will require additional skill building to ensure women are on par with men in maximizing technology use.

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Affordability is another major constraint that needs to be included in holistic development programming, including both the cost of acquiring technology and, more relevant to this research, energy affordability. The cost of connection and high tariffs may be out of reach for the poorest and most vulnerable groups, strengthening the case for greater consideration of the individual needs of different consumer segments when planning interventions to ensure that no one is left behind.

What practices should policy makers and development actors consider?

Understanding the intersectionality of gender, energy, and displacement is key to effectively ensuring gender equality for energy interventions in displacement settings

Responsive integration should start immediately after displacement occurs by building the foundations for long-term development-oriented actions in humanitarian aid settings prior to direct project intervention. Energy must be part of the equation, and access to modern energy should be a pillar of the intervention framework. Beyond providing basic services, planned development must also consider building women's endowments and agency, with energy as the

enabler. This approach could significantly reduce the risk of vulnerable groups becoming victims and begin forging a path to empowerment through economic voice.

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National authorities have primary responsibility for the well-being of the displaced, but countries' energy access plans often fall short of including displaced segments (GPA 2018). It can be complex to strengthen integration policies

and regulatory frameworks in overburdened and poorly structured systems. All the more reason programmatic development should consider the overall condition of the local enabling environment and tailor sector policy support to address the energy needs of forcibly displaced people and host communities by strengthening integration policies and opening labor markets, among other actions.

The mutual reinforcement of gender and energy to reach SDGs 5 and 7 should not stop there. Gender and energy are key drivers of the integration and achievement of all 17 SDGs.

This Live Wire was cleared by Gabriela Elizondo Azuela, practice manager, ESMAP, and peer reviewed by Nathyeli Yethzi Acuna Castillo, consultant, ESMAP Gender and Energy Global Program.

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