

A photograph of a woman with a headscarf smiling and holding a small solar panel in front of a traditional thatched-roof hut. The background is a blurred natural setting.

# Renewable energy for women: For sustainable economic development, decent work, security, and energy access

When it comes to modern energy provision, women across Asia, Africa and Latin America face various challenges, including a lack of access to affordable, reliable electricity, clean cooking fuels, or decent labour opportunities. The multilateral development banks (MDBs) ought to play a crucial role in promoting gender equality and ensuring that renewable energy investments deliver for women's needs, as part of their mandate to finance the delivery of the 2030 sustainable development goals for gender equality (SDG5) and sustainable energy (SDG7). As the MDBs ramp up support for renewable energy, they have an opportunity to ensure that it reaches women in Asia, Africa and Latin America, including Indigenous peoples, and creates economic and development opportunities for them.

To transform energy systems, a just transition process must encompass a gender-responsive, fair and equitable approach. That is why the Banking on Renewables campaign supports renewable energy investments that put people and the environment at the heart of the energy transition, ensuring a democratic energy system for all, and a fully sustainable and 100% renewable energy system<sup>1</sup> with localised solutions. The just energy transition presents a unique opportunity to facilitate women's potential as change-makers, entrepreneurs and leaders. By embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion, we can create a future where women play equal roles in shaping the energy sector, driving positive impacts for society, the economy and the environment.

## Energy for women: Key issues

### Gender justice

The fossil fuel energy model of the past 200 years has been gender blind, largely ignoring women's energy needs and skills, and as a result has generated gender inequalities in access to and control of modern energy, including a feminised picture of energy poverty and a male-dominated picture of the energy sector (oil, gas and coal) and energy policy.<sup>2</sup> Energy and gender justice are crucial issues that intersect with gender equality, social justice and sustainable development, and are indispensable for women's economic, social and human rights.<sup>3</sup>

Many MDBs lack comprehensive gender inclusivity policies and action plans, and too often, public finance and renewable energy investments reinforce discrimination and inequality. Some MDBs highlight women's rights or diversity, but their actions often fall short, failing to fulfil their promises and lacking the impact needed to truly empower women or meaningfully address the rights of individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including considering black and brown women.

### Energy poverty

Energy poverty affects almost half of the world's population. It disproportionately affects women and girls mainly because of structural inequality, gender norms and traditions, as acknowledged by The International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy (Energia).<sup>4</sup> In many parts of Africa and Asia, in households still dependent on traditional energy (such as wood or dung fuels and manual labour), women and girls are often the primary household energy managers for domestic consumption, such as cooking. In addition, they are often also responsible for livelihoods, and lack access to affordable clean modern energy options. This increases the unequal burden of unpaid work and also represents a fundamental barrier to progress to access sustainable economic opportunities, decent work, and security.

### Clean cooking

About half of the global population lack the resources to cook in a clean, safe, affordable way, and 90% of the people affected are from lower and lower-middle income countries.<sup>5</sup> Lack of access to clean cooking energy causes 3.7 million premature deaths each year, with women and children being the most vulnerable to this.<sup>6</sup> This is the context in the Global South where in Africa alone, women and children account for 60% of early deaths as a consequence.

## Women's role in agricultural production, weaving and wider decent work

In many developing countries, women work in agriculture as farmers, weavers, manual labourers and entrepreneurs. However, they continue to face social, cultural and institutional barriers that limit their access to land. Energia found that women in Sub-Saharan Africa have fewer options when it comes to markets and job opportunities, limited access to capital, and are twice as likely as men to work in the informal sector of the economy and to specialise in lower-paid sectors.<sup>7</sup>

## How multilateral development bank investments can ensure renewable energy benefits women and girls

The MDBs must foster a gender-sensitive renewable energy transition at scale to ensure that the shift to clean energy benefits both people and the planet, and promote access to affordable and reliable energy as a right. By strategically directing financial resources, technical expertise and policy support, MDBs can help Africa, Asia, and Latin America leapfrog outdated, polluting energy systems and build inclusive, sustainable economies. In the long run, this transition can lead to higher economic growth, resilience, and competitiveness on the global stage. There are several ways this can be effectively targeted, both nationally and locally.

### 1. National renewable energy infrastructure:

National transitions to renewable energy will require the expansion of sustainable renewable energy and related infrastructure at a scale to deliver national green industrialisation and power. This supports expanding cities and also provides reliable and affordable energy access for the citizens. This will require deployment of a diverse range of renewable projects, energy storage, energy efficiency and energy management. It will need investment in strong national energy strategies that have been developed and implemented with and for communities, particularly with women. MDBs can support governments in adopting gender-sensitive policies and clear benchmarks for gender inclusion in renewable energy projects. This encourages investment in education and skills development for women and ensures that gender considerations are embedded into energy planning at both national and regional levels.

### 2. Training and education for women

To be effective this has to involve supporting initiatives that provide women with the training and skills necessary to access green jobs, particularly in areas where they have historically been excluded, such as in technical roles or leadership positions within the energy sector.

Investment in electrification of public resources is vital to maximise benefits for women, and must include health-care and community services (public hospitals, schools, etc) for effecting deep and long-term improvement in society and reducing immediate health needs.

### 3. Local infrastructure: Off grid energy and storage

MDB investments in off-grid energy as a solution for accelerating rural electrification in Africa, Asia and Latin America would create access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy for communities, and in turn reduce arduous work for women.

MDBs should invest in solar-powered water pumps and sanitation systems in rural areas where women often bear the burden of collecting water, and in urban areas to improve living conditions for women living in informal settlements. They should also invest in clean cooking: Affordable cookstoves that reduce or eliminate smoke and fuel use, improving health outcomes and saving time for women who traditionally spend hours collecting firewood or cooking with traditional methods. As well as energy for irrigation, providing women farmers with access to solar-powered irrigation systems enhances agricultural productivity and improves food security.

### 4. Women-owned enterprises

Investment in women-owned micro, small, and medium renewable enterprises — through increasing grant-based funding — can ensure sustainability, increased agency and independent control over resources. These initiatives are the backbone of the economy, providing employment and supporting livelihoods. This is crucial to enabling economic development and meeting growing energy demands, particularly in Asia.<sup>8</sup>

## Recommendations:

MDBs should be positioned to promote gender equality into all aspects of the renewable energy transition they support, funding projects that advance clean energy infrastructure while ensuring women are recognized, benefit equally, and are represented in decision-making. Through targeted investments and a clear commitment to gender equality, MDBs can help build a sustainable, fair and just renewable energy future for all.

1. MDBs should prioritise **quality investments, grants-based funding and concessional finance** to support renewable energy development in Asia, Africa and Latin America, enabling energy accessibility, affordability and reliability without adding to national debt burdens; preventing harm and potential detriment to employment, land use and environmental health; and delivering direct benefits for women through grid and off-grid electrification projects and increased investment in clean cooking to reduce household air pollution and protect women's and girls' health.
2. MDBs' investments in renewable energy infrastructure have potentially large associated risks related to social and environmental damages, with impacts on women and marginalised communities often greatest. MDBs must therefore **strengthen and enforce the implementation of their Environmental and Social Framework (ESF),<sup>9</sup> and be accountable to environmental and social standards** (ESS) including free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous people. All investments must ensure full and effective public participation and women's inclusion in decision-making processes as one of the principles of ESF.<sup>10</sup>
3. MDBs should support governments, through technical support and relevant instruments, to promote **women's leadership in energy governance**; supporting policies that promote women's representation in energy policy-making and leadership at all levels, ensuring inclusive and equitable energy systems. This means engaging women in consultation processes regarding the use of community lands and resources and engaging women's perspectives and needs in land use agreements, resettlement plans and local community benefits.<sup>11</sup> And eliminate tokenism by fostering gender-staffing and addressing systemic barriers.
4. MDBs should effectively **engage civil society, communities, Indigenous peoples, women and youth as active stakeholders** in the 100% sustainable renewable energy transition, to improve access to modern energy services and bring women more opportunities, allowing them to enjoy greater rights and freedoms as beneficiaries, co-designers, and co-evaluators of renewable energy investments.
5. MDB investments in the Mission 300, a World Bank- and African Development Bank-led initiative designed to address the energy gap in Africa,<sup>12</sup> should prioritise and be accountable **for the development benefits of the electricity supply for local communities, especially women, young people and marginalised groups**, with disaggregated evidence of full reliable, affordable and accessible energy access. Beyond that, MDBs should provide disaggregated data along gender lines for all stages of renewable energy projects, and gender indicators as part of all result monitoring frameworks.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Recourse. (2024). "Banking on Renewables Criteria". <https://re-course.org/newsupdates/banking-on-renewables-criteria/>

<sup>2</sup> The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Right. (2020). "Renewable Energy and Gender Justice." [https://geneva.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/documents/2020/2020\\_GI-ESCR\\_Paper.pdf](https://geneva.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/2020/2020_GI-ESCR_Paper.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Bhumika Muchhala. (2023). A Feminist Social Contract Rooted in Fiscal Justice: An Outline of Eight Feminist Economics Alternatives. [https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/a-feminist-social-contract-rooted-in-fiscal-justice\\_final-rev.pdf](https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/a-feminist-social-contract-rooted-in-fiscal-justice_final-rev.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> International Network on Gender & Sustainable Energy. (2025). "Why Women and Energy." <https://energia.org/what-we-do/why-gender-and-energy/>

<sup>5</sup> World Bank. (2020) "The State of Access to Modern Energy Cooking Services". <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/937141600195758792/pdf/The-State-of-Access-to-Modern-Energy-Cooking-Services.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> International Energy Agency. (2025). "A Vision for Clean Cooking Access for All" <https://www.iea.org/reports/a-vision-for-clean-cooking-access-for-all/executive-summary>

<sup>7</sup> International Network on Gender & Sustainable Energy. (2025). "Why Women and Energy." <https://energia.org/what-we-do/why-gender-and-energy/>

<sup>8</sup> International Renewable Energy Agency for Climate Investment Platform, Investment Forums in South Asia. (2023). <https://www.irena.org/Energy-Transition/Partnerships/CIP/South-Asia>

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, Environmental and Social Framework. (2017). <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/837721522762050108-0290022018/original/ESFFramework.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, Environmental and Social Framework. (2017). <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/837721522762050108-0290022018/original/ESFFramework.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (2020). "Renewable Energy and Gender Justice". [https://geneva.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/documents/2020/2020\\_GI-ESCR\\_Paper.pdf](https://geneva.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/2020/2020_GI-ESCR_Paper.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> World Bank (2025). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/energizing-africa>



Photo: "Rural electrification" by Knut-Erik Helle, 2008. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0. Modified from the original. Retrieved from <https://flic.kr/p/q8RLYS>. Accessed in April 2025.

# BANKING ON Renewables

## About the Banking on Renewables Campaign

Banking on Renewables is a global civil society initiative advocating for public finance institutions to align energy investments with climate goals and just transition principles. Join us in demanding a just energy future that puts people first.

Visit the website to find out more:

 [re-course.org/banking-on-renewables/](https://re-course.org/banking-on-renewables/)

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