



# Renewable Energy and Gender Justice

Briefing Paper



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*Cover Photo: Hadija and her family with an Ensol solar lighting kit, Bariadi, Tanzania By UK DFID, CC BY 2.0.*

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# Climate Change, The Green Energy Transition and the Rights of Women

Our dependence on fossil fuels is driving the climate breakdown which is having catastrophic implications for human rights. Greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) have led to a rise in global temperatures and increased the frequency of both extreme weather events, such as floods and hurricanes, and slow-onset phenomena, such as droughts and sea level rise, threatening food and water security, leading to displacement, and endangering health and life. The UN Secretary General has described climate change as an existential threat and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has cautioned that ‘the world has never seen a threat to human rights of this scope.’<sup>1</sup>

## Climate Change Undermines Women’s Rights

Climate change and its impacts affect women and girls differently to men and boys, due to

entrenched inequalities and harmful gender stereotypes. Disproportionate impacts to the health, safety, food and water security, and livelihoods of women and girls often result from inequalities in their land rights, control of resources and access to decision making processes, as well as their lack of political voice and limited mobility due to caregiving roles. In addition, women and girls make up the majority of the world’s poor, and are more dependent for their livelihoods on the natural resources that are threatened by climate change. Situations of crisis exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities and compound intersecting forms of discrimination, such that disadvantaged or marginalised women and girls, are affected to a greater degree or in different ways.

The implications of the climate crisis for women’s rights have been recognised by the international human rights mechanisms. The Human Rights Council adopted a resolution



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on women's rights in the context of climate change in 2017, commissioned a report from the OHCHR and held a panel discussion on the topic in 2018. Also in 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women adopted General Recommendation No. 37 on 'the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change',<sup>2</sup> and has gradually increased its attention to climate change in its reviews of States parties. The UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies in their 'Joint Statement on Human Rights and Climate Change' (September 2019) also underlined that *'The risk of harm is particularly high for those segments of the population already marginalised or in vulnerable situations or that, due to discrimination and pre-existing inequalities, have limited access to decision-making or resources, such as women, children, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and persons living in rural areas.'*<sup>3</sup> Therefore, arresting climate change, by reducing our GHGs, is crucial for protecting and fulfilling women's rights.

*Photo: Villagers collect wood around Halimun Salak National Park, Java, Indonesia. CIFOR, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

A transition away from fossil-fuel energy sources towards renewable energies is essential and underway, but what will be the implications for gender equality? The fossil fuel energy model of the past 200 years has been gender blind, ignoring women's energy needs and skills, and as a result has generated gender inequalities in access to and control of energy, including a feminised picture of energy poverty and a male-dominated picture of the energy sector (oil, gas and coal) and energy policy. The extractivist energy model has also failed to include women in consultation processes regarding the use of community lands and resources for fossil fuel extraction projects and neglected women's perspectives and needs in land use agreements, resettlement plans and local community benefits.

Feminists are demanding that, to be gender-responsive and just, the energy transition must be more than merely a technical transition from one form of energy to another. It must also transform the energy model to one that is gender-responsive, fair and equitable.<sup>4</sup>

Some women's groups highlight the public value of energy and its centrality to a dignified life. They have emphasised the problems with privatised energy models and the benefits of public and decentralised energy models. Many feminists advocate for 'energy democracy'<sup>5</sup> since renewable energies create significant structural opportunities for diversification in the ownership, management and consumption of energy, with democratic, public and cooperative means of generation and distribution assuming a more central role.<sup>6</sup>

As the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has stressed, decentralised energy production creates new opportunities for the participation of local communities and is especially promising in rural areas, where large scale on-grid production is not cost effective.<sup>7</sup>

As such, it can allow communities to redefine their relationship with energy from a commodity sold by corporations for profit, to an essential service that is provided as part of a democratically governed commons.<sup>8</sup> Cooperative institutional arrangements have also proven to be successful in addressing gender inequalities, poverty and energy poverty and climate change, in both the Global North<sup>9</sup> and the Global South.<sup>10</sup> For example, they can provide employment, be more adaptable to local needs, ensure more equitable access to energy resources, and combat negative gender stereotypes by ensuring women's participation and leadership. Indeed, women tend to be ideally placed to lead and support the provision of energy solutions in view of their role as primary energy users in households and their extensive social networks.<sup>11</sup>

Addressing both energy generation and consumption will be necessary to reduce emissions to the extent necessary to halt dangerous climate change, in accordance with the Paris Agreement commitments. A gender just approach entails challenging the current prioritisation of energy

needs and uses and asking: energy for whom and for what? A just energy transition for many women in the Global South, who are very low consumers of energy and whose lifestyles produce low GHG emissions, demands a system that prioritises their energy needs and those of their communities, including the care economy.<sup>12</sup> Further, the discussion about consumption must include confronting the high consumption and high emissions lifestyles of populations in the Global North.

## Transition To Renewable Energy

Renewable energy refers to solar, wind, hydro, geothermal and biomass energy sources. Although the pace of change must sharply increase if the climate catastrophe is to be averted, the transition to renewable energy is underway and is increasingly viewed as inevitable due to the rapidly diminishing costs of renewable energy.<sup>13</sup>

This energy transition presents a significant opportunity to address the gender deficits of the current energy model and to embed principles of gender equality and justice in the design of new energy systems, to ensure they advance gender equality. As the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights explained, actions to transition to renewable energy offer a 'triple dividend' by reducing emissions, contributing to more biodiverse societies and tackling poverty and inequality through employment opportunities and increasing energy access. This is particularly the case for women who are under-represented in the energy sector and who are over-represented in assessments of energy poverty.

Renewable energy also has the potential to harm or undermine women's rights, at each of the points along their life-cycles, from the extraction of the minerals on which renewable



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energy technologies depend, to the construction of the infrastructure for energy generation and distribution, and to the commercialisation of energy for domestic uses. Unfortunately, large scale renewable energy projects are already repeating the mistakes of the extractives industry, which has often adversely impacted the rights of local and indigenous communities, invading their lands, failing to obtain their free prior and informed consent and failing to adequately compensate or resettle those displaced.<sup>14</sup>

Ensuring that the energy transition does not harm women's rights and reproduce existing gender inequalities will require that these risks are clearly identified, with human rights principles embedded into each stage of the energy life-cycle. The voices of women from communities and groups most affected by renewable energy policies and by energy poverty must play a central role in this process, given that it is through their experiences and expertise

that we will better understand the gendered impacts of renewable energy policies and their transformative potential for gender equality.

Attention must also be paid to dynamics in the global political economy of renewable energy, given the significant number of renewable energy projects in the Global South that are implemented by companies based in the Global North. Northern States must regulate their renewable energy corporations operating abroad, obliging them to respect human rights and ensuring accountability and access to justice where they do not.<sup>15</sup> The role of donors and international financial institutions supporting renewable energy projects must also be scrutinised.

This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of the nexus between renewable energy and gender justice by drawing out several of the most significant opportunities and risks that the clean energy transition presents for women's rights.

*Photo: Woman carrying a solar panel near Yangambi, DRC.  
CIFOR/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

# The Green Energy Transition as an Opportunity to Advance Gender Equality

The transition to renewable energies presents a number of opportunities to advance gender equality. This section introduces two of the most promising, namely the potential for renewable energy: to address women's energy poverty; and to improve women's employment and livelihood opportunities. To ensure these outcomes and that the energy system reflects women's perspectives and responds to their needs, women's participation in the design and implementation of the energy transition is essential.

## Addressing Women's Energy Poverty

Whilst definitions of energy poverty vary, it can be described as the lack of the essential energy services to ensure decent living conditions, or, according to Oxfam 'reliance on traditional energy sources, which include biomass, human and animal energy, kerosene, candles, and batteries.'<sup>16</sup> Whilst there is evidence that women in some countries and situations have lower access to modern energy than men, and that female-headed households have lower levels of energy access than male-headed households, the study results are mixed. However, it is clear that because of the highly gendered nature of responsibilities in relation to energy, women suffer a much greater burden as a result of energy poverty, particularly in communities in the South, but also in the North.

In economically disadvantaged communities which do not have access to energy, it is common for women to spend several hours a day performing domestic work related to energy collection, including gathering biomass for cooking, lighting, and heating.<sup>17</sup> Many need to walk long distances to do so, leaving them more exposed to harassment and other forms of gender-based violence.<sup>18</sup> The time-intensive activity also generates enormous indirect economic costs and limits the opportunities for women to enjoy their rights to education, work, health and an adequate standard of living, as well as to participate in public and political life.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the burning of biomass has an adverse effect on the health of women due to the indoor air pollution that it creates.<sup>20</sup>

Women and girls also suffer disproportionately when health and educational facilities are not electrified. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, only 28% of healthcare facilities benefit from reliable energy,<sup>21</sup> whilst it has been calculated that around 188 million children worldwide attend a school without any form of power supply.<sup>22</sup> This has a serious impact on girls' right to quality education, with teachers and students left without access to lighting and key educational resources such as televisions, computers and the internet. Similarly, health clinics without an adequate power supply all too often lack essential machines and devices which are necessary to diagnose, medicate, and ensure sanitary conditions. This has serious implications



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for women's access to quality healthcare at critical moments, for instance, during pregnancy and childbirth. Their opportunities for education, health and income earning are limited by lack of modern energy services, and as a result they are more likely to remain trapped in poverty.

Renewable energy can play a significant role in advancing women's rights in these areas. The development of mini-grids and off-grid renewable energy can accelerate progress towards increasing energy access and improving the reliability of existing systems. In turn, this can contribute to ensuring higher quality public services in areas such as education and healthcare, which are crucial for supporting women.<sup>23</sup> Electrified schools, for example, have been found to lower drop-out rates and drastically improve boy-to-girl ratios,<sup>24</sup> whilst the provision of electricity in health centres lowers risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth by allowing for the use of medical technologies, such as ultrasound equipment, which can detect problems early. Likewise, energy efficient technologies such as electric cookstoves or

water pumps can significantly reduce women's domestic care burden,<sup>25</sup> enabling them to complete household chores more quickly, to minimise the health risks associated with indoor air pollution, and to avoid the threats to their safety that result from walking long distances to collect biomass.<sup>26</sup>

To ensure that energy systems are designed to respond to women's needs and to advance gender equality, women's experiences must be heard and taken into account. One interesting measure in this respect is the ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access, which seeks to ensure that the specific energy needs of women are properly understood and accounted for in public energy policies in West Africa.<sup>27</sup>

A word of caution is necessary, however. As women's groups have pointed out, the promise of green technologies that aim to alleviate women's care burden is limited by the fact that they take for granted the highly unequal division of care responsibilities between men and women. In order to be truly transformative, energy access must be linked with an agenda that challenges stereotypes of the role of women in society and that advances their rights and dignity.<sup>28</sup>

*Photo: Women cooking meals in Tawila, North Darfur.  
UNAMID/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

## Women's Employment in The Energy Industry

The renewable energy workforce is growing and by 2016 it employed 8.3 million people, directly and indirectly worldwide.<sup>29</sup> Studies also show that sustainable energy technologies have the potential to produce nearly 70 per cent more jobs than spending on fossil fuels per dollar of expenditure.<sup>30</sup> Given that the female employment rates in the wind, solar, wave and other renewable energy sectors are estimated to be higher than those in traditional fossil-fuel industries,<sup>31</sup> this creates an opportunity for facilitating labour market entry and ameliorating the gross under representation of women in the workforce, as recognised by the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls in its report on 'Women's human rights in the changing world of work'.<sup>32</sup> This can in turn improve the livelihoods of women, allowing them to develop skills and experience, improving their status in the communities in which they live, and challenging negative gender roles and stereotypes. These benefits are compounded by the fact that jobs in renewable energy are often of a higher quality than those in the fossil-fuel industry.<sup>33</sup>

In order to make the most of this opportunity, barriers to women's employment in the renewable sector must be effectively addressed. These include, but are not limited to: the lack of a supportive environment, such as flexible work hours and training opportunities; cultural and social norms regarding gender roles; and the double burden of work and family responsibilities.<sup>34</sup> Measures to ensure a better work-life balance, such as part-time employment and flexi-time arrangements, can be integrated into labour and energy policies so as to promote women's inclusion in the green energy sector.<sup>35</sup>

## Women With Livelihoods Tied to the Fossil Fuel Industry

Whilst the green energy transition will bring employment opportunities for some, the move away from fossil fuels may have a negative impact on workers in the formal and informal economies that rely on fossil fuel-based industries and markets.<sup>36</sup> In just transitions discussions, the fact that the extractive sector is dominated by male workers often leads to the needs of female workers being overlooked, even though women make up a sizeable minority within the sector and are often indirectly dependent on the fossil fuel industries through employment in associated sectors. In Canada, for example, policies that seek to compensate and retrain workers within fossil fuel industries do not cover those that work in the service sectors in oil and gas towns, the majority of whom are women.<sup>37</sup>

In order to ensure a just transition, it is necessary to clearly identify and address women's challenges and perspectives and ensure that re-training initiatives, compensation schemes, social protection arrangements and green jobs are also targeted to women workers, including those working in the informal sector.<sup>38</sup>



A photograph of three women, likely members of a community group, gathered around a table. They are all wearing red jackets. The woman on the left is holding a yellow solar lamp. The woman in the middle is pointing at a solar panel. The woman on the right is smiling. On the table, there are several boxes of solar products, including 'Little Sun' solar lamps and 'GOLITE' solar panels. The background is a plain wall with some plants.

## Case Study

# Energy Access in Urban Communities in South Africa

South Africa is the 12th highest greenhouse gas emitting state in the world, with coal providing over 65% of the country's energy supply. This fossil-fuel driven energy model has failed to ensure universal access and affordability and a large percentage of the population continues to be excluded from adequate sources of energy. The urban poor and informal settlement dwellers make up a significant proportion of those living in energy poverty, their lack of a legal security of tenure often precluding connection to formal energy services and subsidies.

Since 2016, GenderCC's Gender into Urban Climate Change Initiative has been working with communities, primarily informal settlements and peri-urban areas in the cities of Johannesburg and Tshwane. Most of the inhabitants of these communities are without formal employment and engage in insecure work, such as sewing and selling fruit and snacks, in order to make a living. Many areas are not electrified, and even when they are, community members struggle with gaining meaningful access: the high unemployment rate means there is little income available to feed pre-paid electricity meters. When electricity prices rise sharply in the winter months, community members have little choice

*Photo: REED Advisors with their renewable energy devices.*



***“The initiative’s goal is to highlight the benefits of renewable and energy efficient energy sources and to ensure that they become a more prominent part of the energy solutions implemented by cities, communities and local civil society organisations.”***

but to depend on lower quality energy sources such as inferior coal, firewood, paraffin, gas and candles. Alternatively, people resort to illegal electricity connections, a solution that can pose a serious hazard to communities as dangerous connection lines are often weaved across areas in which people walk and children play.

Working within this context can create a number of challenges, so GenderCC collaborate closely with local councilors and existing community organisations, prioritising groups that work on women’s issues. They engage in dialogue with local leaders in order to get a clear sense of the community’s needs, with these leaders then discussing with the wider community to gauge whether any of GenderCC’s projects may be of interest.

### **Renewable Energy & Energy Efficiency for Development**

In 2018 Gender CC began speaking to communities about its initiative, Renewable

Energy & Energy Efficiency for Development (REEED). The initiative’s goal is to highlight the benefits of renewable and energy efficient energy sources and to ensure that they become a more prominent part of the energy solutions implemented by cities, communities and local civil society organisations.

In order to achieve this, GenderCC train women to be REED Advisors, independent entrepreneurs who run their own, local renewable energy businesses and sell sustainable products such as smokeless woodburning stoves, solar chargers, cookers and lighting solutions. The organization helps women with the purchase of product packs that kickstart the business and establishes cooperative “energy efficiency hubs” where communities can access the products. These hubs are also used to provide training, such as workshops on green

*Top Photo: Training conducted in an open space next to the informal settlement where the community resides. They use the space for their food gardens.*

*Bottom Photo: Meeting convened in a community hall to introduce the initiative to the community.*



technology and sustainable business skills, as well as mentoring and support to establish sales channels. Local women are particularly well placed for this task as they are the primary energy users in their own household and are more likely than men to have experience as an informal street vendor.

Equipped with this knowledge and support, REED Advisors make two key contributions to their local community. Firstly, they spread the knowledge that they have learnt about the benefits of renewable technologies and energy efficiency, deepening levels of awareness across community members, local authorities and other service providers. Secondly, through the sale of the sustainable products the REED Advisors contribute towards the uptake of greener and more efficient energy sources. Some REED Advisors are provided further training on how to themselves train additional REED Advisors, allowing the reach of the project to expand deep into local communities.

### **Protecting The Climate and Changing The Lives of Women For The Better**

The REED project has generated a number of positive effects for both the climate and women living in the local community. As the primary household energy users, women are better informed of the range of energy options available to them and supported to make the transition towards cleaner, safer energy solutions. The climate benefits from this shift, which has led to a reduction in the number of households that must rely on burning fossil fuels such as coal and gas.

At the same time, the women who use the products no longer have to use energy sources such as paraffin, firewood and candles for cooking, lighting and heating, which caused significant pollution-related risks to their health and greatly increased the possibility of fires



***REED Advisors, many of whom are single mothers, are themselves provided with a source of income, the project creating employment for women in communities where most people do not have jobs.***

breaking out within their homes. Moreover, given the renewable nature of solar energy, once women have made the initial investment in the products themselves, they can continue to make use of them without paying regular charges. This can allow them to, for example, light their homes, charge their phones and power small radios at times they would not previously have been able to afford, spending less on electricity overall and freeing up money to be spent on other needs.

Finally, the REED Advisors, many of whom are single mothers, are themselves provided with a source of income, the project creating employment for women in communities where most people do not have jobs. As a result, women are better positioned to support both themselves and their families and empowered through an income that belongs to them.



*Ndivile Mokoena, Climate & Gender Activist/Advocate: GenderCC SA – Women for Climate Justice, South Africa.*



# Adverse Impacts of Large-Scale Renewable Energy Projects on Women's Rights

Whilst renewable energy contributes to tackling global warming and opens up spaces for advancing gender equality, it may also harm women's rights. Some of the harms and risks associated with large-scale

renewable energy projects, are identified in this section. It is well documented that renewable energy projects can result in many of the same human rights violations that are traditionally associated with the extractive industries.<sup>39</sup> Mega wind, hydro and geothermal projects have, for example, caused severe social and environmental destruction<sup>40</sup> and had an adverse impact on the livelihoods of women.<sup>41</sup>

*Photo: The July 2017 occupation of São Manoel hydroelectric dam in Brazil by the indigenous Mundurucu people. International Rivers/CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.*

## Women's Secure Land and Property Rights and Participation in Decision-Making

Women enjoy highly unequal rights of land ownership and tenure relative to men, often as a result of customary laws and explicit restrictions on inheritance and ownership.<sup>42</sup> The Social Institutions and Gender Index has found that women have equal legal rights to own and access land in just 28 States across the world,<sup>43</sup> with women estimated to make up less than 20% of all landowners globally.<sup>44</sup> As renewable energy projects require vast areas of land, these asymmetries in ownership and security of tenure can lead to the exclusion of women from the processes of negotiation, consultation and compensation between project operators (corporations and/or governments) and local communities, since project operators typically approach land owners and community leaders.

Women's exclusion is exacerbated further by social norms that limit women's participation in local community decision-making or leadership roles, and deter women from voicing their views in consultations that they can attend. Further barriers include, the holding of consultation meetings at times when women may not be able to attend due to care responsibilities, and the fact that women in rural areas are more likely to be illiterate and speak only indigenous languages.<sup>45</sup> The result is not only that projects are likely to proceed in the absence of the consultation or consent of many of the women in a given affected community, but also that the legitimate needs and concerns of local women go ignored in the design of projects.

Where women are not included in the project consultation process, their needs are not addressed in the compensation schemes that are agreed between renewable energy companies and local communities. Land ownership again plays a major role in this context, since compa-

nies often seek to reach agreement regarding compensation with landowners or, in the case of relocation, to pay them compensation for the loss of their property and homes. Since property is commonly registered in the names of men, women may not benefit directly from these schemes, worsening gender inequalities within households and communities and leaving women vulnerable to poverty and dispossession.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, compensation schemes often provide for skills-development and retraining based on remunerated work, leading to discrimination against women, who are more likely to engage in informal care work and thus less likely to receive compensation for loss of livelihood.<sup>47</sup> A lack of female participation is also more likely to result in compensation that is less equitable for the community as a whole, with women more inclined to ask for investments in community services such as health clinics and schools.<sup>48</sup>

A variety of different steps can be taken to protect women's rights in this context. In order to encourage the participation of women in consultation processes organisers can: dispense with admission rules based on land ownership; use specific channels of communication to reach women; schedule consultations at times that do not clash with daily tasks such the preparation of meals; ensure childcare provision; use suitable and accessible language; and hold women-only consultations in which it may be easier for more women to freely voice their opinion.<sup>49</sup> In addition, compensation schemes can be adapted to be more inclusive. This could be as simple as requiring that project documentation asking for the name of landowners provides two lines, so as the names of both the man and the woman in a household can be written in.<sup>50</sup> For example, in a resettlement program that resulted from the construction of the NamTeum 2 Dam in Laos, land titles were issued jointly to men and women, and joint compensation was provided to resettled households. The project also created alternative livelihood activities that were traditionally performed by women, such as the raising of chickens.<sup>51</sup>



*Allegations of abuse have become more common in recent years, ranging from threats and intimidation, to attacks, and the murder of human rights defenders.*

## Gender Based Violence and Women Human Rights Defenders

Renewable energy projects often bring with them an influx of predominantly male temporary construction workers and an increase in insecurity, exploitation and violence against women.<sup>52</sup> For example, workers and new roads often lead to a sharp increase in demand for sex workers, which can result in higher incidences of unwanted pregnancies, prostitution, trafficking, and the transmission of sexually-transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, management interventions tend to be limited to providing workers with condoms.<sup>54</sup>

The renewable energy sector is also consistently ranked in the top-four most dangerous sectors for human rights defenders, presenting more of a threat than the oil and gas industry.<sup>55</sup> Allegations that the renewable energy sector is responsible for human rights harms are most often made in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Allegations of abuse have become more common in recent years, ranging from threats and intimidation, to attacks, and the murder of human rights defenders.<sup>56</sup>

Women human rights defenders are often on the front line of protecting water, land, environment and labour rights threatened by large infrastructure projects and face threats, intimidation, harassment and attacks, as well as unique, gender specific threats, such as threats of sexual assault and rape.<sup>57</sup> The work of women human rights defenders is often viewed as a challenge to traditional gender norms and it is not unusual for targeted campaigns to seek to further stigmatise women within their community by attacking their role as wives and mothers and making insinuations about their sexuality.<sup>58</sup>

Large-scale renewable energy projects have also been found to foster division and political polarization within communities by offering economic and other benefits to some landowners and refusing to do the same for the rest of the community.<sup>59</sup> These practices foster a climate of violence against human rights defenders, particularly affecting women human rights defenders.

A tragic high-profile example is the case of the indigenous activist Berta Cáceres, who was harassed and killed for her efforts to protect indigenous rights and halt the construction of a hydroelectric dam in Honduras. In 2018 seven men were convicted of her murder, with the court establishing that they had been hired by executives of the dam construction company.<sup>60</sup>

*Photo: The grave of murdered human rights defender, Berta Cáceres. Trocaire/CC BY 2.0.*



## Case Study

# Women Human Rights Defenders in the Community of Unión Hidalgo, Mexico

Unión Hidalgo is a small community of 14,000 inhabitants located in the region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico, which is mostly inhabited by Zapotecas, one of the largest indigenous groups in the country. The community faces high levels of poverty, precarious living conditions and limited access to essential services and opportunities. However, due to its geographic position, orography and wind speed, the region has attracted major international investments in wind energy. In 2015 a large energy company, Electricité de France (EDF), through its subsidiary, Eólica de Oaxaca, started negotiating usufruct land contracts with selected community members, including so-called “landholders committees”, which do not represent the entire community, to develop a large-scale wind park in their territory.

*Photo: Community members from Unión Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Mexico.  
Isabel Campaña for ProDESC A.C.*



*“We are not against any enterprise of renewable energy in particular, and we agree that action must be taken to address climate change, but not in this way, with these corporations extracting everything from our indigenous territories.”*

**Woman Human Rights Defender of Unión Hidalgo,  
November 2020.**

By 2017, Eólica de Oaxaca had received all the necessary licences from the Government of Mexico to begin the construction of the wind farm Central Eólica Gunaa Sicarú, involving the installation of 115 wind turbines with a total capacity of 300 MW and an investment of 353 million USD. Today there are 31 large-scale wind parks in the region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

This new wind energy project risks exacerbating the negative impacts that the community already suffers from the widespread development of wind farms in the region, such as loss of land and livelihoods, increased violence and noise pollution.

The women and girls of Unión Hidalgo have experienced loss of land and territory, limitations on their access to natural resources, energy poverty, limited participation in public and political life, lack of employment opportunities, and increased violence against human rights defenders.

### **Energy Poverty**

In Unión Hidalgo, most of the women in the community spend several hours a day on care and domestic work. These care burdens, however, can be significantly reduced by ensuring women's access to electric appliances. However, the women have explained that high energy prices make electricity expensive for most of the families of Unión Hidalgo. Despite the opportunity for the wind farms to directly address this energy poverty and to raise the community's living standards, the community members of Unión Hidalgo have not received

any reduction in energy prices from the wind energy companies.

In Unión Hidalgo women often use other sources of energy, such as firewood, for cooking, heating, and lighting. The men tend to be responsible for collecting the wood (mesquite) that the women use to cook traditional food, such as memelas, totopos and baked fish. The construction of the windfarms has enclosed land and severely restricted the community's ability to collect wood, resulting in fuelwood scarcity. This has increased the price of firewood and made it more inaccessible to the women who rely on it to prepare traditional dishes. Wind farms have thus affected important income earning activities and are also encroaching upon the community's capacity to express their cultural traditions.

### **Access to Land and Natural Resources**

Women are particularly affected by the loss of land and territory to the wind farms as they generally do not have secure land tenure rights. As a result, when the land is leased or sold to wind energy companies, women do not directly benefit from, or have the ability to influence, those transactions. Local governance institutions and procedures all too often give prominence to landowners in decision making processes, thus it is mostly men who decide how to use and manage community land, and women have no effective means of voicing their needs and concerns.

In addition, the loss of land to wind energy farms has also severely restricted women's access to essential natural resources, such as firewood



and herbs used in traditional medicine, both of which are crucial for the preservation of their indigenous culture.

### **Lack of Employment Opportunities For Women**

According to some of the members of the community, wind farms offer very few employment opportunities for locals, and particularly women, as most vacancies are reserved for highly skilled workers coming from foreign countries or other cities. Members of the community mentioned that women have been interested in applying for jobs, but wind energy companies do not normally hire local women. In any case, the few positions offered to the women of the community are usually temporary, expose women to the high levels of violence and insecurity in the region, and are in low paying jobs related to cleaning and security.

The general climate of violence in the community, which has been created by exacerbated social tensions derived from the wind farm projects, discourages most women from applying for the employment opportunities that they offer. Not only have wind energy companies not delivered on the promise of job creation and economic prosperity, they have also failed to protect their workers from harassment and violence.

*Photo: Saturation of wind turbines in the community of Unión Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Mexico. Isabel Campaña for ProDESCA.C.*

### **Right To Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and Women's Participation in the Consultation Process**

In 2018, after failing to respect the communities' right to free, prior and informed consent, the Mexican authorities started a consultation processes with the community in relation to the Central Eólica Gunaa Sicarú project. However, the process was incompatible with human rights standards as companies withheld information on the project, and tried to bribe community members and influence the outcome of the process. After the community complained to the Court, in October 2018, a landmark judicial decision ordered that the consultation process must comply with ILO Convention no 169.

Few women have participated in the consultation process. The human rights defenders mentioned that of approximately 400 people who participated in the first few stages of the process, only 50 participants were female. Most of the women who participated were the wives, daughters and partners of landowners, who did not speak or engage meaningfully in the process. Furthermore, the State did not make any effort to organize the consultation with the indigenous community at times and locations accessible and convenient for women, nor did they provide sufficient information in appropriate spaces to incentivise women's participation in the process. For instance, one woman mentioned that meetings were held at times in which women needed to take care of their children and prepare meals. So far, the consultation has failed to take a gender sensitive approach and ensure that women's needs are considered.

### **Violence Against Woman Human Rights Defenders**

After the indigenous consultation started in 2018, violence against human rights defenders



*“Women tend to be the ones ensuring families are healthy, that the land provides what we need for nourishment, that our culture continues to be fostered, because it is in these actions that you may find unity and solidarity—that is life. So why is EDF not willing to listen to us on this important project that affects our everyday life?”*

**Woman Human Rights Defender of  
Unión Hidalgo, November 2020.**

escalated. It created tensions and divisions between landowners, who sought economic benefits, and those who sought to defend the environment and their territory. The few female human rights defenders that have openly opposed the construction of the wind farms have been stigmatized, harassed, and subjected to violent attacks. As their advocacy activities challenge traditional gender roles that require women to “stay at home” and “take care of their children and family”, it is often the case that women human rights defenders are the most severely harassed by sympathizers of wind energy farms.

It is also common that people around them, including some of their families and friends, question their work and are constantly trying to convince them to abandon their advocacy. Pre-existing conditions of gender inequality are compounded by the context of violence against human rights defenders, which actively discourages women from speaking out, mobilising, and demanding their rights.

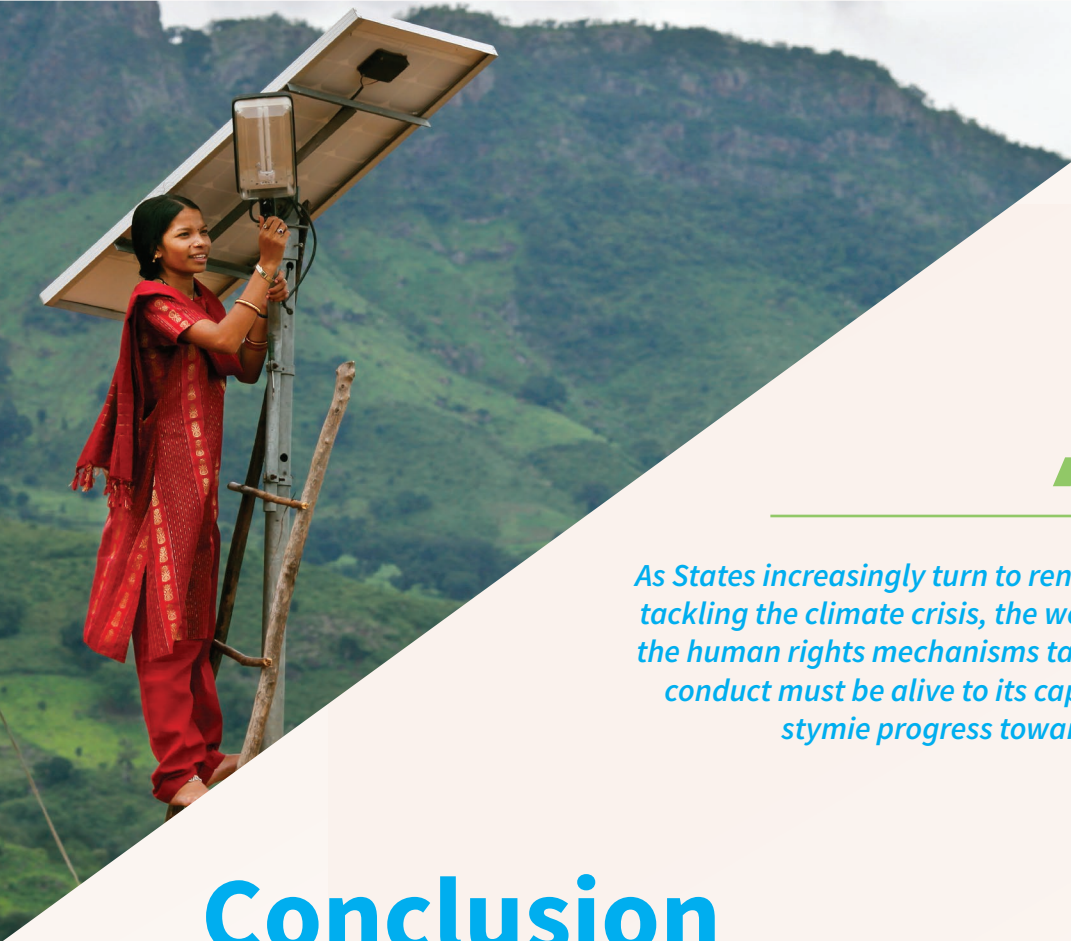
## Conclusion

The community of Unión Hidalgo are determined to defend their land and territories from the human rights abuses committed by both

the national authorities and the wind energy companies. The women of Unión Hidalgo demand a meaningful dialogue where the voices of women in the community can be heard, and their needs and concerns taken into account. Their hope is that the contracts negotiated with the renewable energy enterprises are rendered invalid and a new consultation process is commenced, in which all members of the community can participate in accordance with human rights standards. In their view, it is only then that it will be possible to take a decision on whether any other wind farms should be built in their territory.

Note: This case study is based on a participatory consultation conducted with three women human rights defenders of the community of Unión Hidalgo: Guadalupe Ramírez, Rosalba Fuentes and Rosario Castellanos on 14 November 2020.

Verónica Vidal, Deputy-Director of Operation at ProDESC and Board Member at Front Line Defenders, contributed to the development of this document.



*As States increasingly turn to renewable energy as a means of tackling the climate crisis, the women's rights movement and the human rights mechanisms tasked with monitoring States' conduct must be alive to its capacity to both advance and stymie progress towards gender justice.*

## Conclusion

Against a backdrop of climate induced human rights harms unlike those ever seen before, growing acceptance that the future of the energy industry lies with renewable methods of production is to be welcomed. Yet, as the renewable energy revolution reshapes the way we live, work and power our societies, it also important to examine in detail the implications that this will have on the rights of women.

In many respects, the transition to renewable energies presents an opportunity to break with a dependence on fossil-fuels that generated harms to human rights alongside damage to the environment. Extending access to sustainable energy can reduce energy poverty, improve women's health, and alleviate the burden of gendered care responsibilities, as evidenced by the work of Gender CC in South Africa. Similarly, the improved gender balance of the renewable energy sector is cause for hope that the green transition will bring more equitable, high quality employment for women in the energy industry.

*Photo: Woman with PV panel. Engineering for Change/CC BY-SA 2.0.*

At the same time, there is a danger that large-scale renewable energy projects will adversely impact on women's rights by exposing them to gender-based violence, excluding them from participation in consultative processes, and ignoring their needs in resettlement and compensation schemes. The experience of women human rights defenders struggling against wind farm projects in the community of Unión Hidalgo in Mexico demonstrate the need for concrete action to address these pressing harms.

As States increasingly turn to renewable energy as a means of tackling the climate crisis, the women's rights movement and the human rights mechanisms tasked with monitoring States' conduct must be alive to its capacity to both advance and stymie progress towards gender justice. The voices of the women directly affected by the transition must be at the centre - since it is only with their knowledge, experience and expertise that we can hope to maximise the benefits and mitigate the harms of the green energy revolution.

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## About GI-ESCR

The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR) is an international non-governmental human rights advocacy organisation. Together with partners around the world, GI-ESCR works to end social, economic and gender injustice using a human rights approach.

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