



The Global Initiative
for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights



**Written Contribution to the research and report of the
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in
accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 47/24 entitled “Human
Rights and Climate Change”**

The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR), SOGESCA, Focus Association for Sustainable Development, the Project on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ProDESC) and Geres appreciate the opportunity to inform the research developed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in the development of UN Secretary General’s report on the adverse impact of climate change on the full and effective enjoyment of human rights of people in vulnerable situations. This written submission seeks to respond to question No. 5 of the questionnaire circulated by the OHCHR to collect inputs from all relevant stakeholders.

Question No. 5. Please identify and share examples of good practices and challenges in the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of the human rights of people in vulnerable situations in the context of the adverse effects of climate change.

The climate crisis has exacerbated inequalities around the world. Historically the responsibility for emissions that drive climate change lies within the hands of Global North Countries, while mostly Global South countries face the brunt of climate change related challenges and disasters. Moreover, climate change largely affects marginalized people already living in precarious conditions as they are least likely to be able to mitigate and adapt to the adverse impacts of the climate crisis and meaningfully participate in decision-making and voice their concerns. A 2020 report from the World Bank has calculated that climate change will drive 68 million to 135 million into poverty by 2030.¹ Since the Global South has the highest concentration of people living in poverty, this will be even further increased by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.² Globally, women and girls are overrepresented among the poor compared to the population as a whole.³ Since they face harmful gender stereotypes and systemic discrimination affect women’s access to education, control over ownership and assets, intra-household negotiations and many more,

¹ World Bank. 2020. *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune*. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi: 10.1596/978-1-4648-1602-4. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO, p. 12

² Ibid., p. 32

³ Ibid., p. 125

they face additional challenges to move out of poverty and for their special interests, needs and contributions to be reflected in climate and energy policies and projects.⁴

An important element of poverty is the lack of essential energy services to ensure decent living conditions. While energy poverty affects men and women, women suffer a much greater burden because of the gendered nature of responsibilities in relation to energy.⁵ In economically disadvantaged communities which do not have access to energy, it is common for women to spend several hours a day performing domestic and care work related to energy collection, including gathering biomass for cooking, lighting, and heating. Many need to walk long distances to do so, leaving them more exposed to harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. The time-intensive activity also generates enormous indirect economic costs and limits the opportunities for women to enjoy their fundamental rights to education, work, health, and an adequate standard of living, as well as to participate in public and political life.

Additionally, the burning of biomass has an adverse effect on the health of women due to the indoor air pollution that it creates.⁶ Health risks compound with the environmental impacts of over exploitation of firewood and charcoal, which contribute to deforestation and biodiversity loss in local ecosystems.⁷ Access to renewable energy, as well as to energy efficient appliances is thus key to move women and girls out of poverty and fulfill their economic, social, and cultural rights, while protecting the environment.

Gaps in energy access and conditions of energy poverty cannot, however, be addressed through energy based on fossil fuels, which is the main driver of global CO₂ emissions. Thus, reimagining our energy consumption and production is essential to halt the climate emergency. The transition to renewable energies is on-going and many States have stepped up their efforts to move away from fossil fuel energies. The latest commitment at COP26 to quit coal is a key example of such action.⁸ Nevertheless, measures taken by governments to mitigate climate change and to switch to renewable energies often do not take into consideration the human rights impacts and the inequalities that such measures will represent for people living in vulnerable situations, especially women and girls. Women are thus often disproportionately impacted by both, the adverse impacts of the climate crisis as well as by the mitigation and adaptation measures articulated to address the climate breakdown that do not take into consideration their rights, specific needs and concerns.

First off, the dominant energy transition model is based on large-scale renewable energy projects which often violate the human rights of communities and workers alike, including threats, intimidation, land grabs, dangerous working conditions, and harms to indigenous

⁴ A. M. Munoz Boudet et al., *Gender Differences in Poverty and Household Composition through the Life-cycle: a Global Perspective*, World Bank, 2018, p. 6.

⁵ The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, [Renewable Energy and Gender Justice: Briefing Paper](#), GI-ESCR, 2020, p. 5, [ss](#).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷ Sovacool, Benjamin K., *The Political Economy of Energy Poverty: A Review of Key Challenges*, August 30, 2011. *Energy for Sustainable Development* 16 (2012) p. 272–282, [ss](#).

⁸ UNFCCC, *End of Coal in Sight at COP26*, United Nations Climate Change, 4 November 2021, [ss](#). Last accessed 30 November 2021.

peoples' livelihoods.⁹ Since women have unequal access and control over land ownership and tenure, they often remain excluded from the “processes of negotiation, consultation and compensation between project operators (corporations and/or governments) and local communities, since project operators typically approach landowners and community leaders.”¹⁰ The benefits of such energy projects are thus rarely shared, while several of the costs, including the social and environmental impacts, are socialized with local communities. A key example of such on-going human rights abuses is the current case taking place in Unión Hidalgo, Mexico, where a large-scale energy project led by *Electricité de France* is accused of violating the human rights of the indigenous Zapoteca peoples which has a severe impact on the women in the community as highlighted in recent [allegation letter](#) issued by the UN Special Rapporteurs on extreme poverty and human rights, on the rights of indigenous peoples, on the situation of human rights defenders, and on the right to development.¹¹

Second, women are strongly under-represented in decision-making positions in local community governance bodies as well as in the workforce of the energy industry and at top-level decision-making positions in government and the corporate sector driving the energy transition. A recent study found that on average, only 13.9% senior management positions in the energy sector were held by women, the renewable energy industry currently lies below the sectoral average at 10.8%.¹² Furthermore, in international negotiations in which energy and climate change issues are discussed, most negotiators are men. The average percentage of women across national delegations at the UNFCCC increased from 30% in 2008 to 39% peaking at 40% in 2018.¹³ The lack of women's participation in decision-making at all levels is most likely reproducing an inadvertent male bias and is a key underlying factor that continues to replicate gender inequalities in global efforts to decarbonize energy systems. The renewable energy industry will be a significant source of new job opportunities across different economic sectors. Ensuring gender equitable hiring processes, training opportunities, and greater work/life balance schemes will be key in empowering women and girls and challenge harmful gender stereotypes to lift them out of poverty, and ensure their voices inform the transition to a low carbon world. Moreover, since women are underrepresented in the energy sector, they are often overlooked in discussions about just transitions of the workforce. It is necessary to clearly identify and address women's needs 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.¹⁴

Despite the negative impacts of energy policies and practices by several States and corporate actors, there are key examples of good practices. The EmpowerMed project¹⁵

⁹ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, *Renewable Energy & Human Rights Benchmark: Key Findings from the Wind & Solar Sectors*, BHRG, 2020, p. 13 ff, [ss.](#)

¹⁰ GI-ESCR, op. cit, p. 12

¹¹ More information on the Unión Hidalgo case can be found here: <https://prodesc.org.mx/en/union-hidalgo-en/> Last accessed 30 November 2021.

¹² Graham Pilgrim et al., *Women in senior management roles at energy firms remains stubbornly low, but efforts to improve gender diversity are moving apace*, International Energy Agency, 2021, [ss.](#)

¹³ European Capacity Building Initiative, *Pocket Guide to Gender Equality Under the UNFCCC* (European Capacity Building Initiative, 2020), p. 12, [ss.](#)

¹⁴ GI-ESCR, op-cit, p. 7.

¹⁵ More information on the EmpowerMed project can be found here: <https://www.empowermed.eu/> . Last accessed 30 November 2021.

(Empowering Women to Take Action Against Energy Poverty in the Mediterranean) aims to contribute to energy poverty alleviation and improve the health of people affected by energy poverty in Mediterranean countries' poor coastal areas, with a particular focus on women. EmpowerMed tackles energy poverty through, among other methods, collective advisory assemblies that gather about 20-30 people affected by energy poverty in common spaces to help transfer and exchange knowledge and skills about energy use and action that can reduce the effects of energy poverty. The main characteristic of the community approach is that it uses the network's collective intelligence to engage members to support one another. EmpowerMed has the main purpose to empower women affected by energy poverty to trigger transformative changes in domestic energy use practices and replicate exemplary cases of gendered local energy poverty alleviation approaches.

At State level, in 2019 Kenya's Ministry of Energy launched the "Gender Policy in Energy"¹⁶. The policy mainstreams gender into the national energy legal and institutional framework and aims to ensure that energy services respect and protect constitutional rights on substantive gender equality. It is the first national policy of its kind in Africa. The policy provides a framework to incorporate gender perspective in all energy policies, programs, and projects. It further establishes commitments and strategies to ensure gender's sustainable mainstreaming at all levels and phases throughout the national energy sector. Its rationale and guiding principles also highlight a critical need to promote women's participation and address gender imbalances in access, benefit sharing and decision-making, to create an enabling policy framework that advances a rights-based approach to women's participation in the energy transition. Nevertheless, while progress on the implementation has been made, most programs and policies are still gender-neutral and therefore fail to address factors that lead to gender differences in access and impacts.¹⁷

Taking all the above into consideration, it is crucial that mitigation efforts by States, especially regarding the renewable energy transition, to ensure that women and girls are not only taken into consideration but have an active part in the decision-making on renewable energy projects and related institutions. Combatting harmful gender stereotypes which impede women's and girls' access and control over energy sources, as well as their access to negotiating spaces. Moreover, renewable energy projects must be in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and pay particular attention to the impact of such projects on the livelihoods of women and girls. To ensure women participate in productive energy uses, it is essential to provide universal access to safe, reliable, and sustainable energy sources to communities currently living in energy poverty.

To be transformative, the energy transition cannot be conceived only as a technical move from one way of producing energy to another, it needs to address its gender and human rights deficits and tackle the root causes of poverty, inequalities, and environmental degradation. To ensure a gender-just transition to a low carbon world we need to foster a gender equal and rights-aligned transition to renewable energy.

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¹⁶ Kenyan Ministry of Energy, *Gender Policy*, 2019, [ss](#).

¹⁷ Energia, *Gender and Energy Country Briefs: Kenya*, 2020, p. 7, [ss](#).