

## **Written Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment**

### **Report on Human Rights, Transformative Actions and the UN Sustainable Development Goals**

The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the UN Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment's thematic report on the transformative rights-based actions required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As we approach the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, it is crucial to consider progress and deficits in the current achievement of the SDGs and strengthen connections that link the 2030 Agenda to the respect, protection, and fulfilment of all human rights, especially the right to a clean, healthy, and safe environment. Human rights are the guiding compass towards a more sustainable and equal world where people, especially those who have been historically marginalized, are at the center of transformative actions leading towards a just green transition.

Therefore, GI-ESCR would like to inform the Special Rapporteur on the following question:

#### **8. How could increasing gender equality contribute to more rapid progress towards SDG 7?**

UN Women has declared gender equality to be the necessary foundation for progress across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, the progress made towards the fulfilment of SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) is largely insufficient and fundamentally worrying. The 2030 Agenda's slogan to leave no one behind must include women and girls, in all their diversity. Therefore, considering the benefits of advancing women and girls' human rights for the SDGs, including SDG 7, is quintessential.

Energy is the key driver of our economies and societies, influencing how we organize and structure our everyday lives. However, with the raging climate emergency, we need to change our understanding of how we produce and consume energy as it is currently the main driver of global warming, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity across the world. While States and other relevant stakeholders are slowly shifting away from fossil fuels towards more clean and green energy sources such as wind, solar, and hydro, this green transition opens new doors to find innovative and sustainable solutions to break through oppressive systems that have

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women, The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2022. [Link](#)

marginalized women and girls for centuries. At the same time, promoting gender equality is a key motor to ensure the achievement of SDG 7 on affordable and clean energy.

The right to participation is a cornerstone to achieve gender equality. Only through women and girls' continuous active and meaningful participation can States and other relevant stakeholders ensure that their needs and demands are adequately reflected in policies, practices, and law. In relation to energy, this plays an especially important role as women and girls are underrepresented within the private energy sector as well as government agencies working on energy related policies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the current narrative on climate change largely focusses on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) subjects which have historically faced an underrepresentation of women and girls. Therefore, pushing for more active and meaningful participation of women and girls will have several positive impacts on the achievement of SDG 7. For example, EmpowerMed has established collective advisory assemblies in which women affected by energy poverty gather in common spaces to help transfer and exchange knowledge and skills about energy use. This community-based approach to knowledge sharing has empowered participating women to alleviate or even escape energy poverty in the Mediterranean region.<sup>3</sup>

First, by including them in the decision-making processes at all stages of energy projects they are more likely to consider and address the different energy needs and demands of women and girls. This can lead to significant progress in women and girls' access to energy while guaranteeing that other human rights, such as the right to an adequate standard of living, do not get harmed by energy and other development projects by public and private actors. The recent Unión Hidalgo case is a devastating example of projects that do not adhere to human rights principles and obligations. In this case, the French corporation *Électricité de France*, through its Mexican subsidiary, has been building a wind farm on the indigenous lands of the Zapoteca peoples without adequately consulting with the community, especially women and girls. This has led to flagrant violations of women's rights to participation and an adequate standard of living, among others.<sup>4</sup>

Second, by opening more economic opportunities and removing existing barriers for women and girls in the private and public energy and STEM sectors, these sectors will strongly benefit from a diversification of voices at the decision-making table and the lived experiences of women and girls which in turn will create more sustainable solutions that are also tailored to women and girls' energy needs. Moreover, through women and girls' active and meaningful participation, the recognition of the fact that their energy requirements and consumption differ from their male counterparts and related data collection will lead to a better understanding of the needed energy supply and access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services, ensuring that policies and laws regulating the access and supply of energy are meeting broader demands and needs, thus benefiting targets 7b and 7.1 of SDG 7. For

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<sup>2</sup> GI-ESCR, *Towards a Gender-Just Transition: A Human Rights Approach to Women's Participation in the Energy Transition* (GI-ESCR, 2021). [Link](#)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> GI-ESCR, UN experts call on all *Électricité de France* (EDF) key stakeholders to uphold their human rights obligations in the development of a wind-farm in Unión Hidalgo, Mexico, December 2021. [Link](#)

instance, the non-governmental organization Sustainable Development Foundation in Yemen (SDF) is implementing the “Enhancing Rural Resilience in Yemen” (ERRY I) intervention to improve lives in local communities by installing solar energy systems and training women and young people to take on employment opportunities as solar energy microgrid owners, managers, and operators.<sup>5</sup> Graduates from the course provided by SDF acquire knowledge and skills to develop sustainable energy solutions while providing opportunities to communities to improve their livelihoods and create new economic activities in a country engulfed in a humanitarian crisis and where acceptance of women’s participation in income-earning activities is still limited due to traditional gender roles. Another promising practice is the ‘Gender Policy in Energy’ launched by the Ministry of Energy in Kenya in 2019. The policy is the first African initiative of its kind aimed at ensuring gender’s sustainable mainstreaming at all levels and phases throughout the national energy sector, including the integration of gender consideration in energy monitoring and evaluation.<sup>6</sup> These promising practices have made significant advances in considering women’s energy needs and concerns in energy policy planning and project development.

Third, women and girls have since long advocated for an ecofeminist approach to the climate crisis in which States and other relevant stakeholders must recognize the link between the current extractive economy and the intersectional exploitation of women and girls. In this line, environmental and feminist activists have been pushing for an end to the extraction of fossil fuels which also disproportionately impact the livelihoods of women and girls, towards a gender-just green energy transition. Through increasing gender equality, ecofeminist voices are more likely to be taken into consideration in decision-making which would hence speed up efforts to increase the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix, in line with target 7.2 of SDG 7.

Increasing gender equality and thus the participation of women and girls in all their diversity at all levels will also necessarily lead to a democratization of our energy systems which will redistribute the political and economic power in the energy industry. This redistribution will lead to a decentralization of energy systems away from fossil fuels and the progressive move towards community-based renewable energy systems as they are more in line with the needs and demands of women and girls who make up the majority of people living in energy poverty. These solutions are more affordable and accessible to all and have therefore the potential to lift communities out of energy poverty and to develop energy solutions that are responsive to the local and gender differentiated needs. For example, the Women Network for Energy and Environment (WoNEE) in Nepal has been providing training activities on safe and efficient energy use on a regular basis as well as training women entrepreneurs who own electrical appliance stores to repair and maintain electrical appliances, especially e-cooking technologies, promoting these technologies in the region. As a result, women community members living in poverty have simultaneously, reduced their economic dependency on other family members and increased their family’s income. Through these trainings, WoNEE has

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<sup>5</sup> You may visit the website of SDF Yemen for further details on the project. [Link](#)

<sup>6</sup> Kenyan Ministry of Energy, Gender Policy, (2019). [Link](#). Also see: Energia, Gender and Energy Country Briefs: Kenya, (2020). [Link](#)

seen a boost in women's confidence levels while participating in the electrical appliance sector which is largely male dominated.<sup>7</sup>

This local and feminist ownership over energy and decision-making will also shift the way in which we govern the provision of public services such as health, education, water, and sanitation, all of which are dependent on reliable energy. This would thus push for public ownership of these services, guaranteeing that women and girls continue to have an active and meaningful say in the shaping of related policies and laws.

Increasing equality for women and girls will thus improve several targets of SDG 7, reaching from energy access and supply to increasing renewable energy and more democratic energy systems. It will set in motion a continuous cycle in which gender equality will increase energy democracy and vice versa, leading not only to an improvement of efforts to achieve SDG 7 but also other SDGs for which the sustainable production and consumption of energy plays a vital role.

For more information, please consult the following publications:

- GI-ESCR, Towards a Gender-Just Transition: A Human Rights Approach to Women's Participation in the Energy Transition (GI-ESCR, 2021). [Link](#)
- GI-ESCR, Human Rights for a Just Energy Transition in Mexico, Monitoring Report (GI-ESCR, 2021). [Link](#) (in Spanish)
- GI-ESCR, Renewable Energy and Gender Justice (GI-ESCR, 2020). [Link](#)
- GI-ESCR, UN experts call on all Électricité de France (EDF) key stakeholders to uphold their human rights obligations in the development of a wind-farm in Unión Hidalgo, Mexico. December 2021. [Link](#)

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<sup>7</sup> GI-ESCR, supra 2