

EXPERT COMMENTARY

Just Energy Transitions in the Indo-Pacific: A Case for a Gender-Transformative Agenda

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Energy transitions, climate action, and the sustainable development agenda are closely intertwined with each other. Meeting the Paris Agreement’s goals by transitioning away from carbon-intensive energy sources along with the pursuit of universal energy access that leaves no one behind is critical to energy transition policies in the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region is not only highly vulnerable to climate change but also contributes to more than half of the global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (“New UN Report”). Moreover, within this region, approximately 50 million people are likely to continue to remain without energy access in 2040 (“Enhancing Energy Access”). As of 2015, nearly 455 million people lacked access to electricity and about 1.9 billion people were dependent on traditional solid fuels for cooking and heating. However, the worst impacts of such energy poverty are experienced disproportionately by women and other marginalized groups (“Gender and Energy”). This calls for a gender-transformative just energy transitions agenda in the region that ties together climate justice and gender justice imperatives.

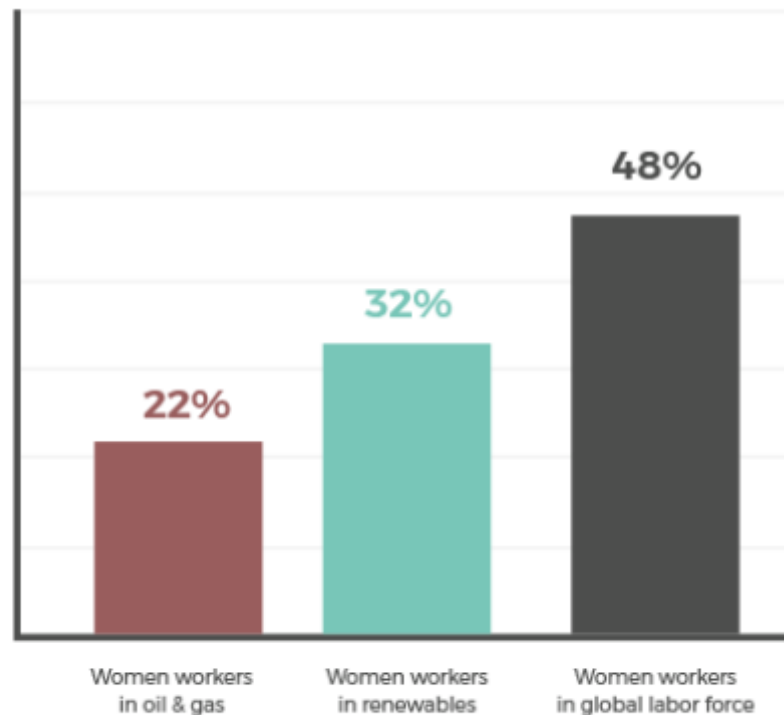
What does Gender-Transformative Just Energy Transition Entail?

While just energy transition is aimed at developing fair and inclusive processes of transitioning away from fossil fuels, a gender-transformative approach in the energy sector helps to ensure that energy transition-related policies take into consideration the differentiated needs, roles, and expectations of different genders. Furthermore, it helps create equal opportunities for all genders through adequate representation in policy-making, labour force, financial activities, and knowledge and capacity-building initiatives. What is equally important to recognize is that a gender-transformative approach

goes beyond providing equal opportunities and ensuring equal representation to women. It stresses upon empowering marginalized communities by addressing the structural inequalities, power imbalances, and gender norms that put women and other marginalized communities at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing these opportunities. For instance, the lack of access to grid-based electricity forces women and children in the Indo-Pacific region to spend approximately 20 hours per week fetching fuel (especially firewood) for activities such as cooking, indoor cooling, heating, and lighting (Zhai). On the one hand, women suffer from several respiratory illnesses as they are subjected to indoor pollution caused by the use of fossil fuels. On the other hand, the lack of adequate outdoor lighting, especially in rural areas, render women and girls more vulnerable to violence including sexual assaults from intimate and non-intimate partners. Access to affordable clean energy can enable women to participate in more empowering and productive societal activities that have so far witnessed their underrepresentation and marginalization.

Although women are better represented in clean energy jobs than in the fossil fuel-based sectors, their participation accounts for only one-third of all renewable energy jobs globally (“Renewable Energy and Jobs”). A transformative agenda would need to bridge the gender gap in the labour market through targeted policies and governance initiatives. Another challenge is to address the lack of recognition of informal, unpaid work performed by women in both fossil fuel and clean energy-based labour market marginalizes them further. For instance, a transition away from fossil fuels such as coal, which is a primary energy source in many Indo-Pacific countries, would have to take into consideration women’s participation in informal and small-scale mining sectors that is often disregarded in the just transitions-related policy discussions (“Just Transition for All”).

Figure 1: Share of Women in Oil & Gas, Renewables, and Global Labour Force



(Source: “Gender Equality for an Inclusive Energy Transition.” *International Renewable Energy Agency*, 12 Jan. 2019, <https://www.irena.org/news/articles/2019/Jan/Gender-equality-for-an-inclusive-energy-transition>.)

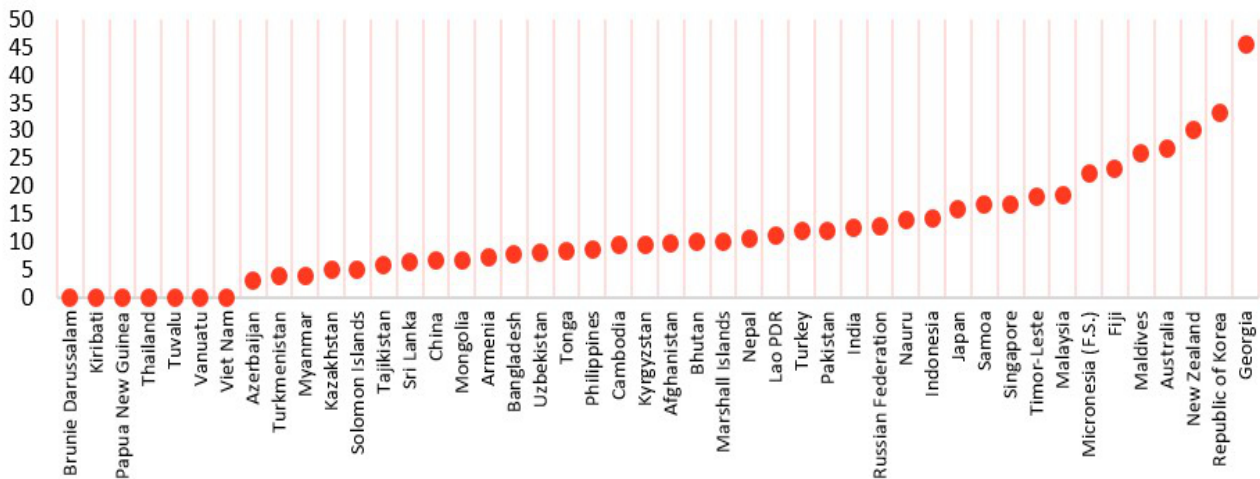
Beyond the economic imperatives of better participation in the labour market, a transformative approach would focus on boosting women’s agency through empowerment in choosing socio-economic roles deemed appropriate by them, including the modalities of securing access to and managing energy resources (United Nations Industrial Development Organization). Greater women’s representation in decision-making processes can usher in transformative change in workplaces by steering the adoption of gender-sensitive policies, fair distribution of socio-economic opportunities, and incorporation of gender-based differences in perspectives on efficient energy usage (such as based on women’s experiences of managing households) (“Gender Equality for an Inclusive Energy Transition”).

With new energy systems and policies being implemented for cleaner energy transitions by countries in the Indo-Pacific region, the education sector plays a key role in the implementation of gender-transformative energy transition policies. Most countries in the region witness low participation of women in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), leaving them at a disadvantage when it comes to entering the clean energy workforce as well as availing clean energy and climate finance. Even though government and public and private sector enterprises have made available several clean energy financing schemes, women are unable to access them. On the positive side, efforts are being made to enhance women's access to jobs and finance in most countries in the region. One such example is Bangladesh's Infrastructure Development Company Ltd. Programme which provides not only financing but also technical assistance to women entrepreneurs in the solar energy sector with support from the Green Climate Fund ("Gender Action Plan"). The proportion of women in the upper echelons of decision-making processes within the clean energy industries is far worse. In Indonesia, where women constitute less than 5 percent of the decision-making positions, the government in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched a certification training workshop to build capacities of women renewable energy practitioners to become energy managers and auditors (Dewanti).

The trends in many countries of the Indo-Pacific region indicate the marginalization of women in decision-making processes due to their lack of representation in political positions, including key ministries. Similarly, the negative ramifications of energy transitions on fossil fuel communities (including women who mostly engage in informal activities in the sector) need to be assessed (Suravee and Swain). Simultaneously, the impacts of large-scale clean energy projects on the marginalized communities, including women, in the form of dispossession (for example, of land rights) needs to be understood better by policy-makers in order to frame improved gender-responsive just transitions policies (Poojary, Narayan and Hingne). With countries investing in energy transitions, contemplating phasing down or out coal and other fossil fuels, and signing partnerships

for just transitions, it is imperative that these efforts take into account gender issues. This could be achieved by advancing gender-transformative socio-economic diversification, especially since fossil fuel sectors have traditionally been plagued with gender biases and barriers to women’s participation.

Figure 2: Proportion of Women in Ministerial Positions (as of 1 January 2020)



Source: United Nations Women. *Snapshot of Women’s Leadership in Asia and the Pacific*, 2020, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/in-focus/csw/snapshot-of-womens-leadership-in-asia-and-the-pacific>.

Figure 3: Number of People Serving as Energy-Related Ministers and on Energy-related Parliamentary Committees, by Sex (as of August 2021), in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories



(Source: United Nations Women. *Gender Equality and Sustainable Energy: Lessons from Pacific Island Countries and Territories*, 2021, https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Gender_Equality_and_Sustainable_Energy_Pacific.pdf.)

Gender-Transformative Just Transitions through Climate Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific

In the Indo-Pacific region, climate change and energy transitions have indeed emerged as an important component of economic, defence, and security strategies of several countries, including India, Japan, Australia, and South Korea. These shared perceptions of challenges posed by climate change in the region have brought them together to create regional cooperative initiatives, including under regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) as well as frameworks such as the Quad (India, Japan, Australia, and the US). However, the existing climate change strategies are mostly not gender-responsive in nature, thereby calling for a reorientation of climate diplomacy approaches in the region, which should build on diverse just transition pathways based on local realities and aspirations that leave no one behind. The Guidelines for Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific, for instance, mentions the need to “promote inclusion by advancing gender equality and women’s and girl’s empowerment” (United States, U.S. Department of State). Similar norms must be embedded in all climate diplomacy-related frameworks in the region.

In fact, climate diplomacy could be a valuable tool to facilitate communication between governmental and non-governmental institutions and actors, and civil society organizations of different countries about diverse gender mainstreaming approaches. These approaches range from merely increasing women’s representation in design, planning, and implementation of policies, programmes, legislations, and projects to assessing their implications on different genders, and transforming the social, economic, cultural, and political structures that discriminate against women and other marginalized communities. An example of such cross-border learning and collaboration is the establishment of Barefoot College in India under the Indian Technical Economic Cooperation (ITEC), which has been actively involved in training women from developing and least developed

countries through workshops and courses on solar engineering as well as health, personal finance, and business education (“The Barefoot Solar Mamas”). Since most institutional and bureaucratic processes tend to treat gender mainstreaming as a technical activity – a box-ticking exercise – that typically involves steps such as nominating more women in forums or organizing workshops with a focus on gender-related issues with the aim of promoting gender equality, rather than a continuous process, a stronger engagement with definitions, goals, and yardsticks of gender mainstreaming is required at all levels of decision-making and policy implementation.

Through existing formal institutional arrangements such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Solar Alliance (ISA), gender mainstreaming approaches are gradually being integrated by governmental and non-governmental actors into climate action and energy transitions processes. For instance, under the ADB’s Gender and Development (GAD) policy, projects on energy access and related education programmes have been implemented that enhance women’s participation in both the supply and demand sides of energy projects as well as design performance indicators of gender equality. However, a key challenge for achieving gender equality goals is the lack of availability of relevant data to evaluate the progress of gender mainstreaming goals, which could be tackled through greater engagement between different stakeholders and rights holders involved in intertwining issues related to gender, climate action, and energy transitions (“Gender-inclusive Approaches”). Hence, climate diplomacy that specifically targets the mobilization of climate finance and technologies to accelerate energy transitions could draw upon various lessons learnt from projects implemented through the ADB and other institutions in the region to usher in a gender-transformative policy. For instance, Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) signed by the G-7 countries with Indonesia and Vietnam will fail at achieving inclusive energy transitions in the region without a gender focus.

Besides, regional frameworks should adopt an intersectional approach that does not treat women and marginalized communities as a homogenous group, but rather addresses the vulnerabilities and

capacities based on race, class, colour, disability, nationality, caste, and other factors that impinge upon marginalization and dispossession. This is why conceptualizations of gender-transformative policies at the global and/or regional levels should also take note of the principles and notions of gender responsiveness embraced by grassroots mobilizations (some of which are led by women and marginalized communities) that have long thrived in the environment and development realms, particularly in the developing world. For instance, Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) projects led by grassroots women's organizations in the Indo-Pacific countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand have helped not only generate much-needed gender-disaggregated data on climate change impacts, but also implement several climate mitigation and adaptation measures such as livelihood diversification and disaster risk reduction ("Climate Justice"). Such activities have opened up spaces, traditionally considered suited only for men, for women. Furthermore, the agency exerted by women at the local level, such as in the case of extractive activities (linked with critical minerals required for energy transitions), should be recognized for it to have a transformational impact at higher levels of decision-making (Mang-Benza).

As climate mitigation and energy transitions are increasingly being prioritized by countries of the Indo-Pacific region, the push for a gender-inclusive just transition would further consolidate climate and gender justice, an indispensable human security goal for the region.

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