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Photo Credit: Nigel Bruce, Guatemala

Clean Cookstoves Can Save Lives & Empower Women

AT ISSUE

Each day nearly 3 billion people rely on solid fuels to cook their food, using traditional cookstoves or open fires in households with little or no ventilation. Exposure to smoke from these polluting and inefficient forms of cooking kills 2 million people annually, with millions more suffering from cancer, pneumonia, heart and lung diseases, blindness and burns. Put another way, household air pollution (HAP) from smoke-inducing coal and biomass results in one death every 16 seconds, mostly women and young children. Cooking shouldn't kill, but for far too many people in developing countries, this is precisely what happens.

WHY ARE WOMEN DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED?

Simply put, women cook – often with children nearby. It's still the case that women have primary responsibility for preparing meals for their families. What's more, women and girls are typically responsible for securing fuel to cook the family meal. When they leave the safety of their communities to search for firewood and other traditional biomass fuels, they're at increased risk of gender-based violence, particularly in conflict areas and from refugee camps. Furthermore, time spent collecting fuel is time not spent on income-generation, education or other activities. In fact, cooking has become one of the most dangerous daily activities for women in the developing world.

TOWARD A SOLUTION

While women bear a disproportionate burden, they're also critical to clean cooking solutions – solutions as potentially transformative as bed nets and vaccines have been in fighting diseases like malaria and polio. What's more, clean cookstoves can empower women, providing significant opportunities for income generation and entrepreneurship.

The clean cookstove value chain offers new pathways for women's economic empowerment. Women can participate in, own businesses around and earn income from product design, engineering, manufacturing, maintenance, marketing, distribution, sales and related enterprise that involves cooking, like restaurants and street food vendors.

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It is also worth noting that because women and girls use 90 percent of their income in ways that benefit their families and communities – compared to 30 - 40 percent for men – their significant capacity to reduce global poverty is chief among the aggregate economic benefits associated with the use of clean cookstoves.

As primary users, women's needs and preferences are also central to successful cookstove design and adoption. Cooking is, after all, a culturally sensitive activity: if new technologies fail to take women's priorities and requirements into consideration, women won't use them. In addition, women play a substantial role in increasing awareness and generating demand – awareness about the dangers of household air pollution and the demand for new technologies to mitigate them. Women's networks and relationships within and across communities can be instrumental for speeding adoption and widespread use.

Clean cookstoves – more affordable, culturally compatible products that produce fewer harmful emissions and burn more efficiently – are available today. But the global prerequisites for a thriving cookstove market are not yet in place, and there are significant barriers to large-scale adoption: consumer awareness is low; industry standards are nonexistent; distribution networks are diffuse; financing mechanisms are underdeveloped; and national policies are inadequate. That's where the Alliance comes in.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR CLEAN COOKSTOVES

The Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves is an innovative public-private partnership led by the United Nations Foundation to save lives, improve livelihoods, empower women and combat climate change by creating a thriving global market for clean and efficient household cooking solutions. The Alliance's 100 by 20 goal calls for 100 million households to adopt clean and efficient cookstoves and fuels by 2020. The Alliance is working with its public, private and non-profit partners to help overcome the market barriers that currently impede the production, deployment and use of clean cookstoves in developing countries.

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