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Title: Women’s economic empowerment for adoption of clean cooking energy

Rural areas of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have stubbornly high use of solid biomass, mainly wood but also crop residue and animal dung, as cooking fuel. The release of carbon results in atmospheric air pollution and also, according to WHO, in the death of millions, mainly women, due to household air pollution.

Despite programmes providing subsidized access to clean cooking fuel, e.g. the Government of India’s capital subsidy for LPG, the adoption of LPG is slow in rural areas where women’s unvalued labour is used to collect wood. Between access and adoption there lies gender relations at the household level. Where women can collect wood with their unvalued labour, wood remains the primary cooking fuel. Our hypothesis is that increasing the value of women’s labour in production, leading to women’s economic empowerment, in terms of earning and control over income, promotes the adoption of LPG as the primary cooking fuel.

The study used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods (a survey of 300 households) in 6 sites of three states of India – Koraput and Mayurbanj in Odisha, Wayanad in Kerala and Dindigul in Tamil Nadu, chosen on the basis of degree of remoteness from well-developed markets. Expectedly, our results show that there is a clear connection between remoteness and the adoption of LPG as primary cooking fuel. More important, our finding is that women’s economic empowerment, carried out through community-based women’s groups, both provides incentives for adopting labour-saving clean cooking energy, and makes it possible for women to challenge existing gender norms about cooking.

Women’s economic empowerment, however, is a relatively slow-moving change. In order to promote quicker adoption of clean cooking energy, promoting LPG as an aspirational good could change the choice architecture.

Our results are important in bringing gender relations into the political economy analysis of energy transitions. Its practical importance lies in adding women’s economic empowerment and the promotion of clean cooking as an aspirational good for access to LPG to result in sustained adoption of clean cooking energy.