

Rural Women, Climate Change and Access to Energy

Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 56) UN Women and MRFCJ Co-Hosted Meeting

On 5 March 2012, UN Women and the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice (MRFCJ) co-hosted an event on Rural Women, Climate Change and Access to Energy at the 56th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York. The objective of the event was to provide an opportunity for grassroots rural women’s organisations to inform the Troika+ of Women Leaders on Gender and Climate Change of their experience of climate change, particularly in relation to opportunities around energy access and their priorities for action in this area.

Participants and focus of the dialogue

The two hour event consisted of 90 minutes of grassroots organisation dialogue, with the remaining thirty minutes dedicated to the Troika+ members offering their key takeaway messages. The dialogue was organised around a series of questions that were posed to the organisations representing grassroots rural women. The questions were as follows:

- What innovative practices or policies have you been a part of or observed that have successfully helped increase women’s access to sustainable energy?
- Where sustainable energy solutions have been introduced (solar, biomass etc.) what are the challenges associated with their adoption or scaling them up?
- If electricity is available, are there barriers that prevent some women and their families from accessing it?
- Are the energy technologies you have access to adequately responding to your needs?
- What are the economic opportunities arising from the current investment in sustainable energy, and what measures could be taken to help women access these opportunities?
- If you could have one result from Rio+20, what would it be?

The conference room was filled to capacity, with more than 90 people attending the event. Speakers from Ghana, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Bangladesh, Gambia, Maldives, Peru, Finland and Norway contributed to the dialogue at the event.

A number of grassroots-connected organisations were represented, including:

- Climate Wise Women
- ENERGIA - International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy
- FOKUS - Forum for Women and Development
- Huairou Commission
- Solar Sister
- World Vision
- Young Men's Christian Association (YWCA)
- ZENAB for Women in Development

The members of the Troika+ attending the meeting were:

- Michelle Bachelet, Under Secretary General and Executive Director of UN Women
- Ambassador Anne Anderson, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations
- Ms. Radha Muthiah, Executive Director, Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves
- Ms. Michelle Higelin, Deputy General Secretary of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) who attended on behalf of Nyaradzai Gubonzvanda, General Secretary of the YWCA

Some CSW Government delegates were also in attendance.

Ms. Bachelet opening comments

Ms. Michelle Bachelet, Under Secretary General and Executive Director of UN Women, opened the event stating that access to modern, clean and renewable energy is a critical issue and that the empowerment of women is fundamental to sustainable development. She said an opportunity exists to collectively advance sustainable development, rural women's empowerment and climate justice by increasing access to sustainable energy where it is needed most. The full text of Ms Bachelet's opening remarks is available on the [UN Women website](#).

Mary Robinson comments

Mary Robinson, as Moderator of the session, explained the genesis of the Troika+ of Women Leaders on Gender and Climate Change and highlighted that Troika+ members have access to decision-making at quite senior levels. She noted that the event provided an opportunity for the voices of women, in particular rural women, to be heard in the context of the CSW as well as

the Rio+20 process and that a summary of the dialogue will be shared with the full membership of the Troika+. Mary Robinson also drew attention to the MRFCJ Principles of Climate Justice that link most closely to energy access — ***the right to development*** and ***sharing benefits and burdens equitably***.

Dialogue with the Grassroots organisations

The main points of discussion are given below, grouped by the themes that emerged from the dialogue.

Finance, markets and scaling up

Finance was identified as a challenge to both accessing and scaling up energy projects. It was noted that while there are many successful pilot projects that address energy access, there is difficulty in bringing these projects to scale due to lack of funding. At a household level, the lack of upfront capital is a barrier both in terms of accessing renewable energy technologies and in capitalising on the business opportunities linked to clean energy provision. Neha Misra of Solar Sister drew attention to their business model, whereby women entrepreneurs receive training and sales merchandise in advance of selling any product, so that they do not have to take on debt before they make their first sale. This upfront funding overcomes the problems of access to collateral and credit.

Small scale funding and simplified access to funds were also identified as important issues. Tracy Mann from Climate Wise Women said that even when funds are available for projects, they can be for amounts in the region of \$200,000. However, what organisations often need is smaller funding amounts of \$5,000 or \$10,000.

While many households are already spending a lot on kerosene, the upfront costs of other technologies can be prohibitive. However, explaining how the cumulative cost of kerosene makes it a more expensive medium to long term option allows households to view the economics in a different way.

Another general issue in terms of electricity access is the actual costs of electricity. Fatima Ahmed of ZENAB noted that in some cases where electricity is available in towns and cities in Sudan, many people don't use it because it is too expensive.

On the global issue of funding, Gro Lindstad of FOKUS said that they have proposed the concept of a Global Green Investment Fund for Women to the Norwegian Government, which would allow women's groups direct access to grants for sustainable development, including funding related to energy. They have proposed that the Norwegian Government speak with Denmark in

their role as Presidency of the EU to seek EU-wide support for the idea. The possibility of accessing climate finance to fund energy projects was also raised in the general discussion.

Another emerging theme from the discussion was that of markets. Gail Karlsson from ENERGIA drew attention to the importance of building an overall market chain to improve energy access. Solar Sister said that it is often the last mile distribution that is the weakest link in the market chain and there is a need to address this. The challenge of distribution, both in terms of getting materials in and products out, needs attention. ENERGIA is investigating how to move from small pilot projects to programmes at scale, as well as investigating how market-based mechanisms can work for women. ENERGIA noted that their studies have shown that most successful energy access programmes have benefited from either donor financing or Government support or both.

Integrated approach

Attention was drawn to the interconnection between energy and other issues such as water, food and education. A speaker from Bangladesh raised the issue of shelter, water and sanitation and their linkages with energy. ZENAB stated that access to development and economic empowerment are essential for enabling access to energy, water and sanitation. Susan Bazilli of IWRP highlighted the relationship between energy and water, with specific reference to the growing issue of water security.

Enabling government policy

The need for policies that support clean, affordable, sustainable energy was highlighted, as well as the need for policies that channel funds to women. Governments have a role to play by creating an enabling environment, providing progressive subsidies and encouraging the role of the private sector through appropriate tax incentives. The discussion also drew attention to the importance of getting governments to consider energy access targets, particularly targets for women. A representative from the Ugandan Parliament highlighted the important role that parliaments play, noting that in Uganda efforts are underway to get tax waivers for solar products. The need for subsidies for rural women who cannot afford the cost of clean technologies, such as clean cookstoves, was highlighted. An example was provided based on a project in Ghana where improved stoves were introduced, financed by the UN Women Fund for Gender Equality.

Jane Kwawu, a gender consultant from Ghana, said that it is important to include women when preparing national policies. She said rural electrification has been relatively successful in her part of Ghana but it is used for street lighting and not for people's homes. She said it was important to bring power to people's homes so that electricity can be used to assist economic activities.

Training, capacity building and research

There was a general consensus that the development of technology needs to engage women in their cultural context and respond to gender differentiated needs on the ground. This usually requires stakeholder engagement and gender analysis at the early stages in the research and design process, to ensure the technology is appropriate for the end-user and to increase its uptake. When the technology is available, there is sometimes a presumption that people will automatically use it. However, if people are not familiar with the technology, they may be reluctant to adopt it. Education on the technology and the product itself is important. An example cited was the introduction of liquid petroleum gas (LPG) to some households in Ghana. The women were afraid to adopt LPG as they were unfamiliar with it. Follow-up visits or other means to share information and check-in on usage need to be planned when introducing new energy products to ensure people have a full understanding of the technology and are using it correctly. A representative from the National Development Planning Commission in Ghana noted the need for commissioning research that draws attention to women's needs.

Leadership, decision making and participation

Jasmine Perryman from the Huairou Commission commented on the importance of recognising women as leaders and the importance of women being placed in positions of power to enable their contributions to solutions that advance sustainable development. She noted the importance of capitalising on indigenous women's knowledge, for example on the types of timber used for fuel and how this can affect the design of fuel efficient stoves. It was noted that a lot of mistakes have been made on cookstove initiatives because women were not consulted in the project or programme design.

The issue of women's participation in decision-making was raised, as was the issue of quotas for women's representation. The importance of involving women in writing national policies was highlighted. It was stated that in order for women to benefit from economic activities, women need to be empowered, their capacity needs to be built and they need to be engaged in policy decision making. Susan Bazilli said that political participation and decision-making was important at all levels, from the highest to the lowest levels. She also stressed the importance of involving those who use the resources in the decision-making process. It was also noted that many women can be successful entrepreneurs if they are given the opportunity.

Cooperatives were highlighted as a potentially powerful mechanism for empowering rural women. ZENAB spoke about female cooperative associations in Sudan. A CSW delegate and NGO representative from Finland said it may be beneficial to consider establishing women cooperatives for energy access, since the main issues for cooperatives is that they must serve their own members.

Private sector

Thilmeeza Hussein from the Maldives said that, given the current economic climate, there is a need to think of more innovative ways to engage the private sector in programme funding. A spokesperson from YWCA said she was glad to hear the private sector being raised in the discussion. With the rise of corporate social responsibility, she said that there are a lot of companies with budget lines for investing in the supply chain. An opportunity exists for partnerships between NGOs and the business sector.

Rio+20

The need for clearly defined actions was highlighted as a key 'ask' from the Rio+20 conference in June. Other results that people want to see are a clear link between energy and gender as well as the link between clean, sustainable energy access and the negative impacts of climate change. Recognition of the rights of indigenous people was also noted as a desired result from Rio+20. Mary Robinson expressed her concern that Rio+20 may address energy in the context of the green economy while ignoring climate change and that this was not appropriate. She called for the impact of climate change to contribute to a sense of urgency in the pursuit of sustainable development. Gail Karlsson from ENERGIA, representing the Women's Major Group to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, shared news of their recently launched survey to gather views, especially from grassroots women, from around the world regarding their objectives for sustainable development and outcomes for Rio+20 in particular: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/Rio20_Gender.

Key takeaway messages of Troika+ members

The Troika+ members were asked to summarise and share their key takeaway messages from the dialogue. The key takeaway messages are summarised below.

The critical role of finance and access to capital needs to be addressed, including the role of the private sector, while ensuring that resources are properly targeted: Ambassador Anderson noted that a lot of the issues raised in the dialogue - access to capital, access to credit, microcredit, female cooperatives, subsidies, entrepreneurs, the role of the private sector - could be combined into hard-hitting language on the need for financing and access to capital. Ms. Bachelet said there is a need to work on funding and to support scaling up access to technology so that energy is more affordable. Ms. Muthiah highlighted the need for greater involvement of the investment community. Ms. Higelin said it was important to make sure resources get to where they are most needed, in particular community-based women-led initiatives.

In order to address energy access, there is a need for an integrated approach that addresses other inter-related issues: Ms. Bachelet, Ms. Muthiah and Ambassador Anderson all noted the importance of an integrated approach. Ambassador Anderson said it was clear that the energy access agenda will not achieve success unless other issues such as education, housing, transport and political participation are also addressed.

Scaling up energy projects and programmes is a challenge that requires the involvement of government, the private sector and civil society: Ms. Muthiah said there is a need to show how projects can work not only at the micro scale but also at the macro scale. She noted the need to go beyond pilots to scale up initiatives and for this, government and private sector partnerships are required.

Women must be involved in the decision-making process at all levels: Ms. Bachelet said that there is a need for more women in positions of power, which is why UN Women are working so hard on the political empowerment of women. Ms. Higelin said there is a need to go beyond rural women as instruments in climate change and users of renewable energy technology and move towards women's leadership and agency. She said this means real access to decision-making at all levels, including in national climate change plans, resource allocations and the development of technologies that incorporate indigenous knowledge.

A commitment to education at a community level is an important component: Ms. Higelin noted the importance of education, not just education on technology and how to use it but also on understanding basic human rights. She said it was important to continue to put human rights at the centre and empower women to claim their rights. Ms. Higelin said that understanding the science of climate change is also important since YWCA studies have shown that, at a community level, some of the science is not known and understood.

There is a need for gender differentiated targets and more research: Ambassador Anderson said that while gender differentiated targets was briefly touched on explicitly in the dialogue, the need for gender differentiated targets was implicit in a lot of the contributions made in the dialogue. Ms. Muthiah said there was a need to conduct more research to move from anecdotes to more substantive evidence.

Innovation is critical and participatory approaches that address cultural issues have an important role to play: Ms. Muthiah drew attention to the importance of innovation, particularly innovation in adaptation, noting that if a product does not address the cultural barriers to adoption, it is not going to be used. Michelle Bachelet said that she has directed that UN Women global and regional Civil Society Advisory Groups be set up, which should include grassroots women organisations.

There is a need for a united, strategic and prioritised stance in order to achieve success at Rio+20: Ambassador Anderson said there are big issues to fight for at Rio+20 and that it is absolutely essential for women's groups to be united, strategic and prioritized. Ms. Higelin said that there is a need to mobilise collectively as women's groups to have a very strong message for Rio+20.

Documents shared by MRFCJ during the meeting

MRFCJ shared a two-page briefing document entitled "Enabling women's development and empowerment through access to clean, affordable, sustainable energy". This document explained why a gender-sensitive approach to energy access is important and included some specific case study examples. A copy of the briefing document is available on the [MRFCJ website](#). UN Women prepared and shared a two-page document entitled "Equality, Empowerment and Energy" that highlighted policy and programming efforts, from CSW to Rio+20, that UN Women is undertaking to promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and the voices of rural women in the fields of climate change and energy.