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News from the Editors

Women and Energy, Gender in Energy: What is it All About?

It seems that a lot of people, and not just women, are concerned about women and energy. More than 700 have already expressed this interest by signing up as subscribers to ENERGIA News and more are coming in every day (welcome new members!).

It appears that a lot of people have been looking for support in this area. The African Development Bank hosted a seminar on "The Role of Women in Sustainable Energy Development" in Abidjan last November: more than forty African women, and quite a number of men, from different energy projects participated. Very animated discussion, in which everyone was involved, went on for three full days. This indicates not only that the subject is one which interests a lot of people; it also indicates that the problem is not a simple one, and that there are many perspectives within it. The recommendations made at the end of the seminar reflect at least some of the possible perspectives on women and energy. These perspectives seem to fall into three different categories or groups, which are in no way mutually exclusive, but which offer different ways of looking at the relationship of women with energy.

Perspective 1: More attention to women's energy needs

A large number of the participants at the meeting was concerned with the fact that in most developing countries cooking is a major, if not *the* major use of fuel. For the vast majority of women, the daily fuel is biomass (wood, charcoal, crop wastes or dung) and supplying it is becoming an increasing problem. In many countries programmes have been initiated either by the government or by NGOs for the introduction of improved stoves or for planting trees to meet such household energy needs. Some have made considerable progress after difficult beginnings. Yet the attention to these programmes in national energy planning, in terms of budgets allocated, is minimal compared to staffing and investment in other areas of energy provision such as electrification or development of petroleum refining capacity etc. Despite the fact that biomass fuels used in cooking account for more than 80% of total fuel use in many African countries, efforts to improve the technology for efficiency and for health reasons account for less than 10% of government energy spending.

Many of the participants at the Abidjan seminar had interesting experiences to tell regarding their successes and their failures in promoting improved household biomass cookers, or replacements for traditional stoves such as biogas digesters and solar devices. Their stories related not so much to the types of technology they were using, but more importantly to the process by which they worked with women in the field to determine their needs and to understand their problems. There was a general understanding that involving local women is essential to the success of such programmes, and suggestions on how to go about this flew from every corner of the meeting room. Many programmes employ local women as animateurs or motivators, to stimulate participation at the local level for example.

It can safely be said that improving cooking technology for energy conservation, for reducing women's fuel gathering burden and for better health, is a major perspective in

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women and energy. More needs to be known about successes and failures, more experiences need to be shared and more pressure needs to be put on governments and funding agencies to provide finance so that successful programmes can be expanded and copied in other places. ENERGIA News presents itself as medium for the publication of case studies for the exchange of ideas and experiences; it welcomes contributions of this kind from readers. Hopefully in time, it may also be able to function as a lobby for increased attention to women's energy needs in the institutions which do the planning.

However, it was clear from the meeting that cooking technology, although of major importance, is not the only energy concern of relevance to women. Many of the participants in Abidjan presented the problem from quite different perspectives.

Perspective 2: More women in energy planning

A large number found a connection between the under-funding of household energy programmes and the fact that there are so few women in the energy planning profession. No wonder so little is being done to relieve grassroots women's fuel problems, argued some, when there are almost no women to look after their interests in this male dominated field.

The energy planning profession is indeed heavily dominated by men, as are all branches of engineering, chemistry and economics, from where most energy planners are drawn. Of the few women employed in the sector almost none rise to positions of seniority. Participants at the seminar in Abidjan were strongly of the view that this situation must change and that women should be encouraged to take technical training to enable them to enter the profession on an equal basis with men. One of the main recommendations was that interested women should take the initiative to network among themselves, to lobby national and international organisations concerning the need for women in decision making roles in energy planning, and to increase the visibility of those women who are already in this profession. Hopefully one of the contributions that the ENERGIA Network can make, is to help those who are interested in promoting women in the energy field, to get together: to provide a forum in which they can express their views, and a voice by which these views can be heard in the wider energy profession.

But is it true that promoting more professional women in the energy planning profession will help the energy situation of poor women in the developing countries? This is a really interesting question that can be debated (readers' views are most welcome on this point). It is true that where governments have special energy programmes for women, they are often managed by female professionals; at least, if women staff is available, they are more likely to be assigned to these duties than men are. There is a tacit understanding that women are interested in women and should be better able to understand their problems and tackle the solutions. If there is a call for training to improve skills in this area, for example a gender training course, a disproportionate number of the female staff is sent (usually by their male bosses). The unwritten reverse side of this is the assumption that men are not interested in women's energy problems.

This attitude is not restricted to departments of energy in developing countries. Donors too, when selecting individuals to make up teams for project-related missions, almost without exception seek female consultants to cover the 'women/gender aspects'. But is this in fact a correct strategy? Is the segregation of women's activities from the mainstream of energy planning to be encouraged? Are there not dangers in carving off women's energy problems as a separate and special sector, one that can easily be marginalised, and one that can easily fall prey to budget cuts? Your views on this contentious issue would be most welcome.

Perspective 3: More gender in energy

The third perspective on women and energy takes as its starting point that women's energy problems have to be seen as part and parcel of their social position. It suggests that they can only be tackled by understanding the real context of the society in which women live. To help women, one has to understand women's *and* men's positions and roles in

family and in the community: these are not independent. A gender-in-energy approach proposes looking at the needs and resources of men and women within the household, and the relationships between these. In many places women do not have control over all household resources, for example over what crops (or trees) to plant on family land. Therefore in planning a tree-planting project to increase the supply of fuel wood, it may make no sense to suggest that women start their own woodlots. A viable solution has to be designed within the confines of what is socially acceptable.

“A gender approach in energy is one which treats the differences between men and women in society as an important variable which always needs to be considered in energy project planning”

Another important point about using a gender approach is that it does not stop at things traditionally thought of as being women's energy problems (i.e. cooking and providing the fuel for this). The gender approach looks at *all* energy investments in terms of what effect they will have on men and women, and on their position *viz a viz* one another. For example, what impacts will a rural electrification scheme have on men? On women? Will it increase their respective working hours and/or their income earning potential? Do they consider this a good thing themselves? Or consider the effects of increased prices for commercial fuels such as kerosine. In what way does this affect men and in what way does it affect women? Out of whose purse does the extra money have to come? Who bears the brunt of having to find a substitute when kerosine becomes too expensive? Energy planners can rarely provide answers to these important questions, because they have generally seen the problems as affecting the household as a whole, rather than the parts of the household. ENERGIA News would be delighted to publish case studies by readers who have looked into such problems and differentiated between the points of view of men and women.

A gender approach in energy is one which treats the differences between men and women in society as an important variable which always needs to be considered in energy project planning, and should be integrated in planning processes as a standard measure. It suggests that to do this, an understanding of gender relationships in the local context is necessary. It also suggests that in formulating energy projects, one should focus on what the impacts of any project are likely to be on men, on women and on the relationships between them.

Three in one

These three different perspectives are not contradictory, neither do they compete with each other: they are mutually supportive in the cause of promoting attention to women's interests in energy. It is not a question of which is the correct perspective but rather of how progress can be made within each perspective. Readers' views on this are most welcome. The floor is open for suggestions!

Margaret Skutsch, Editorial Team

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