

**THE DANISH
INSTITUTE FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS**

SUMMARY REPORT –
ROUNDTABLE ON
THE RIGHTS OF
WOMEN AND GIRLS
IN THE ENERGY
TRANSITION IN SUB-
SAHARAN AFRICA

6 OCTOBER 2021



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1 INTRODUCTION

On 6 October 2021 the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR) hosted a 2 1/2 hour virtual roundtable on the rights of women and girls in the energy transition in Sub-Saharan Africa. The purpose was to map out key gender issues, questions, impacts, challenges, opportunities and ways forward to ensure that renewable energy development fully integrates respect for the rights of women and girls. The meeting gathered 20+ practitioners and experts from the Sub-Saharan African region as well as globally, representing the renewable energy sector, public institutions, civil society organisations and subject matter experts. This summary report captures the highlights of the discussion with a view to contribute to further dialogue and action to embed gender-responsive approaches in renewable energy development in the region.

Roundtable aims and objectives

1. Collectively identify salient human rights impacts, challenges and critical questions associated with the gender dimensions of the energy transition in the region.
2. Generate ideas and strategies to address the identified challenges, including through multi-stakeholder dialogue and actions.
3. Foster exchange and collaboration between actors actively working on the intersection of gender and the energy transition in Sub-Saharan Africa and identify relevant opportunities for further collaboration on these topics.

2 BACKGROUND

While Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest energy access rates in the world,¹ the development of renewable energy in Africa has been increasing over the last decade, with many countries in the region working to increase renewable energy capacity in recent years.² Frequently, the development of and transition to renewable energy is positioned by various stakeholders as ‘inherently good’ due to the potential contribution of the green transition to mitigating climate change and enhancing energy access. Taking a closer look at energy transition dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa, however, it becomes evident that the full range of actual and potential human rights impacts are at play.

Furthermore, while it has been noted that women and girls frequently bear a disproportionate burden of the adverse impacts associated with energy projects and are less likely to share in the benefits, this acknowledgment has not translated into consistent gender responsiveness in the development and implementation of such projects.³ As examples of such impacts, women and men provide and consume energy in different ways, which may render women disproportionately affected by energy issues; women have less access to energy; women workers are underrepresented in the green energy sector, particularly within leadership positions and those related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); women are largely absent in decision-making positions responsible for designing national energy strategies; and women may be subject to potential human rights abuses associated with renewable energy projects. Consequently, if attention is not given to gender inequalities and dynamics, the transition into renewable energy solutions could maintain, or even increase, rather than diminish gender inequalities, or create new inequalities, and subsequent socio-economic, environmental and financial repercussions.⁴ Collective learning and action on how to address the gender dynamics of the energy sector and working towards a renewable energy sector that protects and respects the rights of women and girls is therefore critical.

3 KEYNOTE: GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE RENEWABLE ENERGY SECTOR

The two keynote speakers stressed that the energy transition in Sub-Saharan Africa must be accompanied by a shift in energy access, including associated gender dimensions. While women and girls are responsible for providing traditional energy sources such as fetching firewood, charcoal, dung or other agricultural waste, they are underrepresented as workers in the energy sector. Studies show that women only make up 32% of workers in the renewable energy sector.⁵ While this is higher than the representation of women workers in the traditional oil and gas sector, the speakers stressed that women are underrepresented in decision-making positions, positions within STEM and senior roles. The Covid-19 pandemic has also demonstrated that, in times of crisis, women's jobs are at stake (with evidence of women losing their jobs more quickly than men at the onset of the pandemic), adding a new factor to the risk of casualisation of labour. It was observed that governments and businesses have not set gender equality as a priority in their 'build back better' policies.

Both speakers noted that gender roles, patriarchal cultural and social norms, and prevailing discriminatory hiring practices remain the main reasons preventing women from joining, staying and advancing in the energy sector.

The speakers raised the importance of gender mainstreaming in both government legislation and company policies. Creating networks, supportive mentorships and providing role models in STEM and entrepreneurship were also presented as fundamental to attract and retain women and girls to the energy sector, especially in spheres where they are underrepresented. Supporting coalitions between these networks can also contribute to obtaining more concrete, gender-disaggregated data to provide a strong basis for the creation of inclusive policies. Access to trainings and education through gender-specific programmes, scholarships and even reshaped university curricula is also crucial as entering this sector requires access to trainings with the right funding. Other practical priorities noted included the promotion of a better work-life balance, which can be achieved by having more family-friendly employment policies and paid parental leave. One of the presenters also advocated for the implementation of gender targets and quotas to set specific goals to achieve gender diversity and equity at both government level and in the private sector.

4 DISCUSSION THEMES: KEY GENDER IMPACTS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ENERGY TRANSITION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Through a panel discussion and a series of break-out groups, participants discussed the key human rights issues, challenges and future opportunities related to: (1) women's access to energy; (2) women workers; (3) women in decision-making; and (4) human rights due diligence.

4.1 WOMEN'S ACCESS TO ENERGY, INCLUDING THE INTERPLAY OF ON AND OFF GRID SOLUTIONS

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

The first key human rights impact the participants raised was the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) due to the influx of workers when a project is being implemented and the extremely limited accountability and remedies available for women who have been victims of such violence. It was explained that projects are rarely halted to address occurrences of SGBV, even when civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists become involved to demand accountability from contractors.

Issues of access and 'affordability' of land were brought up by one of the panellists and the subsequent group participants. It was observed that in communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, land titles are most often registered under men's names, making it challenging for women to obtain access to better energy sources without the men's authorisation. This can result in the use of energy sources being geared toward men's interests, which can be in direct contradiction to the fact that women frequently do most of the housework that requires energy. This strongly limits women's access to power connections for their own needs. The absence of clean cooking equipment was also discussed as a challenge, since it directly adversely impacts women and girls' health and safety. The participants also discussed further risks to health as many women living in rural areas have had to deliver their children without the benefit of light, which increases the risk of infection and mortality.

In general, policy development was criticised for its portrayal of women and girls as one homogenous group. Because women are not included in the decision-making and policy design process, they cannot provide their insight. This erases the fact that women from the same country or region may be different, and so are their needs and expectations. An example was offered that this lack of representation also affects

women who have graduated with a university diploma in STEM, as once they reach the labour market, they are directed to more managerial or administrative positions instead of being recruited for careers within STEM and are not able to become executives or advance their careers due to lack of a support networks.

Lastly, the participants noted that access to energy for women does not necessarily mean gender equality in energy use. In fact, in certain circumstances access to energy in the home may contribute to worsening women and girls' situation by prolonging their workday with unpaid household labour, in addition to the work done outside the home.

GOOD PRACTICE STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES

The group discussed the use of gender and human rights impacts assessments as useful tools to tease out the issues related to gender rather than 'blanket' human rights impacts. It was observed that the World Bank had adopted this approach in the projects it is supporting.⁶

The participants shared practices from different countries, citing Kenya's gender-responsive policy in the energy sector as an example.⁷ National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights (NAPs) were also brought up as a means to apply a gender lens to the issue of energy access.⁸ Participants noted that the Uganda NAP was driven by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, who was therefore able to input gender dimensions into the document.⁹ In Kenya, the National Gender and Equality Commission was tasked with developing the gender dimension of business activities for the NAP and, while the energy sector was not directly targeted, this gender-responsive approach would be applicable to it.¹⁰

Lastly, participants discussed the rise of anti-discrimination policies and the use of 'equal opportunities' by companies in their job advertisements to encourage women to apply for positions where they are the least represented.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAYS FORWARD

Directly building on these issues, some participants recommended the adoption of affirmative action policies, which have already been used to ameliorate women's representation in politics. It was stressed that when government resources are utilised in government tendering processes, for example, these policies would 'set the tone' for the private sector, which would have to adapt in order to win calls for tenders.

The promotion of clean cooking energy was also seen as a way to directly address women's practical needs in the short to medium term. While tackling patriarchal gender roles will be a long process, clean cooking devices would have a direct beneficial impact on women and girls' health.

Lastly, participants recommended reviewing legal and institutional frameworks to protect women and girls from SGBV, including internal policies for contractors and in gender and human rights impact assessments.

4.2 WOMEN WORKERS IN THE RENEWABLE ENERGY SECTOR AND VALUE CHAINS

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

The limited access to opportunities and employment for women was listed as an important challenge despite the promulgation of government policies seeking to prevent this. The issue is also linked to the lack of implementation of these policies by business actors themselves. The participants underlined the general marginalisation of women but noted that discrimination was worse for women who found themselves at the intersection of other vulnerable or marginalised groups. For example, mothers and expecting mothers face important barriers where they are not considered as a valuable 'workforce' or do not have the possibility to go on leave until they give birth. It was noted that women with disabilities especially face a higher degree of marginalisation. Participants also observed that most gender inclusive government policies usually only benefit urban women and their effectiveness is impacted by the urban-rural divide, which is prominent in certain countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Echoing this, the participants noted that the work environment in the energy sector is often not inviting or accommodating for women. Some projects require travelling to remote areas which may conflict with women's obligations to their family and as carers for young children or the elderly. Participants noted that working environments within renewable energy are often not very family-friendly, SGBV is frequently prevalent and women's safety is not guaranteed.

The nature of the positions occupied by women was also brought up as a challenge, as participants noted that leadership and decision-making positions in renewable energy are frequently dominated by men. Gender equality considerations are still considered as a very secondary issue to certain companies; participants noted that companies' first priority is making profits and there persists a general pushback from industry associations to focus on gender equality. It was also noted that gender stereotypes may prevent women from accessing interesting field work as certain companies consider women to be more 'detail-oriented' and therefore task women with administrative tasks such as writing reports. This results in a lack of representation of female role models in engineering or technical services that could help tackle these stereotypes and encourage women and girls to join the renewable energy sector.

GOOD PRACTICE STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES

Building on their discussions on the challenges faced by women workers, the participants agreed that there should be an open debate challenging gendered cultural and social norms, including those that oppress women. Participants suggested that as an efficient way to catalyse a sustainable change, governments should also invest into translating United Nations measures and standards into their country context to ensure the effectiveness of these policies. In addition to creating policies, efforts should also focus on ensuring that they are actionable, monitored and implemented in an ongoing manner.

The participants also recalled the importance of women-led organisations and networks to support other women workers, such as the Global Women's Network for the Energy Transition (GWNET)¹¹ or Solar Sister.¹²

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAYS FORWARD

In their discussion, the group raised some important questions to steer the next steps in addressing the challenges identified, including how to ensure that government policies are enforced, but also how to put emphasis on the energy sector and women's role in the energy transition. Working on answering these questions would inform which milestones and resolutions should be set to drive gender equality forward in the sector.

The group underscored that advocacy for women workers must be continuous, that government actors, businesses, CSOs and others must put in place relevant and enforceable policies and that all must ensure that the policies are adapted to the specific country context in which they are implemented.

4.3 WOMEN IN ENERGY TRANSITION DECISION-MAKING, INCLUDING AT POLICY AND PROJECT LEVELS

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

Participants noted that a persisting challenge is the lack of representation of women in both the general workforce and the decision-making spaces in the renewable energy sector. This is reflected in policies around land tenure, agreement-making, negotiations and virtually every stage of projects. A direct consequence which the participants noted was the lack of a proper analysis of the gender dimensions of the energy transition, including access and use of these new energy sources – which means that this transition will not effectively be accompanied by a shift in the way women will be able to access energy. The question was posed: what does the transition from fossil fuel energy to renewable energy mean for a woman in Sub-

Saharan Africa who does not even have access to fossil fuel energy in the first place? Gender-informed analyses of the impacts of renewable energy projects remain too limited to make effective decisions at policy and project level. The participants noted that the energy transition has not really integrated a transition of energy in the home, which is where women commonly use energy. This is directly linked to an absence of consideration and research into how women and girls use energy. To provide an example, an anecdote was shared in which the promotion of solar cooking stoves, while theoretically a positive clean solution that could benefit women, was abandoned by women because the devices were impractical as they required leaving the device outside to charge in the sun and was extremely slow to cook food.

The extremely limited access to land ownership and tenure security for women was noted by several participants. It was pointed out that where land is communally owned, men are frequently the ones to negotiate and agree to or reject projects presented by investors and companies. Companies and investors often fail to understand the dynamics between women and men in communities and as a consequence do not include women in the negotiations in an effective manner. A very practical example provided was the importance of setting meetings at a certain time in the day, otherwise women would not be able to attend because of their position in the home and within the family – in morning hours, women are likely to be busy with bringing their children to school, fetching water for the day or handling other related household chores.

Another challenge is that companies, investors and even communities do not think of these impacts until they occur. Marginalisation and a high level of poverty in some communities prevent decision-makers from considering long-term adverse effects on health and the environment, especially when these concern women and girls. An example was provided of a project using chemicals to capture hot steam, which contaminated water in the area, which in turn poisoned the livestock that women were tasked with caring for. This had not been envisaged when the decision to accept the project was made. As a result, women were forced to go to more remote areas to ensure that these animals did not eat poisoned plants or water.

Access to remedy was listed as another great challenge. Women's absence and lack of integration into the decision-making process concerning energy developments means that they should at least be able to access remedies or 'obtain justice' when they face adverse impacts caused by such energy projects.

One of the participants also noted that discussions on the energy transition must also consider how Sub-Saharan Africa will play a role from the perspective of being the supplier of the minerals needed to build clean energy devices, such as solar panels. This raises the question of how these minerals are mined, by whom and under which conditions.

GOOD PRACTICE STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES

The group mentioned associations and networks of women in energy as precious initiatives that must be promoted and whose work should be supported. These organisations are doing important and necessary work in relation to providing education on gender and discrimination within social and cultural norms. They can also bring their knowledge to the decision-making spheres and business spaces by contributing pre-investment assessments of local contexts and existing power dynamics within a community. This part of the discussion also built on the challenge linked to considering adverse human rights impacts affecting women and girls only after they have occurred; the participants agreed that these organisations' work can be instrumental in bringing a gender perspective at the strategic level and can help communities and other stakeholders to understand the potential long-term effects of a project, including on health and the environment. Furthermore, the participants underlined the importance of including communities in investment processes and understanding the context surrounding land tenure.

An example of a geothermal project was given, in which all decision-making positions were filled by women, which was part of the country's plan to require women to play a meaningful part of every project.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAYS FORWARD

A first general recommendation from the participants was the inclusion of gender expertise and more women in decision-making starting from the policy level. Women should be included in policy design, assessments, agreement-making, as well as more 'local' tasks such as liaising with women's organisations. Discussion spaces for women-led associations were therefore also recommended by the group. Building on the challenges that the participants discussed, they recommended focusing on obtaining clearer information and better data on the way women and girls access, use and work in the energy sector.

Participants also stressed the importance of awareness raising, creating feedback mechanisms and making sure that renewable energy policies address the question of safe and accessible energy for women. This means that government and companies need to invest in ways to build communities', and particularly women's, understanding about the linkages between energy projects and their rights in a language that they can understand.

4.4 DUE DILIGENCE CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPANIES AND INVESTORS ON ADDRESSING GENDERED IMPACTS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ENERGY TRANSITION COMMUNITIES

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

The first challenge that the group noted was the existence of pervasive power struggles linked to the fact that most energy projects are being implemented in marginalised areas characterised by strong patriarchal structures. The consequence is that, no matter the efforts put into including women, the final decision is

usually given by men. The lack of due diligence conducted in those areas has a disproportionately negative effect on women as they often do not get compensated when men agree to 'give away' the land. The participants noted that where businesses have a human rights policy, these are often not monitored or effectively implemented.

The issue of land ownership was again raised as a key element to integrate in the due diligence process. It was explained that the legislative and regulatory framework as well as the social power dynamics surrounding land are extremely complex in many countries in the region and require more in-depth analyses from companies and investors. It was also stressed that effective grievance mechanisms must be planned for and put in place to avoid protracted conflict or complete rejection of a project by a community. These grievance mechanisms need to account for the potential obstacles to women's access. Participants also recalled that judicial mechanisms are not always the solution as they are lengthy, costly and most of the time adversarial, which is why some women, especially in rural areas, tend to prefer alternative dispute resolution and community-based mechanisms.

GOOD PRACTICE STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES

Participants commented that a good strategy to directly address these challenges is for multinational companies to carry out gender-responsive due diligence. It can also involve fostering public-private partnerships and partnerships involving local grassroots organisations to give them the possibility to present their opinions and provide their insights in project development. Such grassroots organisations could also play a role as intermediary between the communities and businesses to ensure that the due diligence process has been conducted in a manner and language understood by all parties. This can foster inclusivity in due diligence and contribute to ensuring that projects do not omit or exclude women in the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAYS FORWARD

The group recommended that organisations focus on disseminating information in a simplified way that will allow communities to take ownership of the renewable energy projects that are presented to them, in addition to presenting the opportunities that come with the project to provoke interest in participating. It was also flagged that some women may not participate in human rights due diligence due to limited understanding about the process or energy transition issues generally, despite being directly impacted by these considerations.

A second recommendation was to carry out a baseline survey on human rights due diligence and gender mainstreaming in renewable energy projects to understand the existing context-specific gender norms, land inheritance issues and the power structures in decision-making in affected communities.

Lastly, the group proposed creating safe spaces for women to air out their issues, express their points of view and have the opportunity to provide solutions to their problems. The participants echoed previous remarks by recalling that where men are the ones to identify problems and then give the solution, this is not representative of the entire concerned population.

5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of the roundtable was to engage in collective exploration of the key issues, challenges and opportunities with regard to the rights of women and girls in the development of renewable energy in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is clear from the discussion, that ample opportunities exist for further collaboration between key stakeholders to identify and address the human rights challenges and impacts of the renewable energy sector on the rights of women and girls. Furthermore, opportunities exist to collect and share good practices for developing and implementing gender-responsive approaches to renewable energy and energy access in the region. We look forward to ongoing dialogue and collaboration in this space.

ENDNOTES

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