



Background Paper

Mano River Union Conference on Energy and Gender
“Women’s Economic Empowerment through Energy Access in the
MRU Sub-Region”
7-9 May 2013,
The Place at Tokeh Beach
Freetown, Sierra Leone

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1. Introduction

The Government of Sierra Leone, the Mano River Union (MRU), the ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) are jointly organizing a Gender and Energy Conference on ***“Women’s Economic Empowerment through Energy Access in the MRU Sub-region”***, from 7-9 May 2013, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The event is hosted by the Government of Sierra Leone. It will facilitate the participation of the Ministers responsible for Energy Sector as well as Gender and Development in the Mano River Union (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire), the ECOWAS Commissioners for Infrastructure and Gender, as well as other key experts from the ECOWAS region.

The conference is a follow-up to the ECOWAS High Level Energy Forum, held from 29 to 31 October 2012 in Accra, Ghana within the global initiative of Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) with its goal of ensuring universal access to modern energy services by 2030 as envisaged by the UN Secretary General. At the forum, ECOWAS Ministers adopted two major policy documents namely, the ECOWAS Renewable Energy Policy and the Energy Efficiency Policy. It was expected that by 2014 Member States of ECOWAS would have developed and adopted their own "gender-sensitive" national renewable energy policies which will contribute to the realization of regional ECOWAS targets on energy and gender issues.

This conference on the theme, “Women’s Economic Empowerment through Energy Access in the MRU sub region” is therefore seeking to highlight and consolidate the issues, perspectives and challenges on energy and gender with a view to presenting an MRU sub-regional Action Plan and the creating a platform for the establishment of an MRU sub-regional working group on women and sustainable energy.

2.0 Energy and Gender issues in the Manor River Union (MRU)

The direct links between energy and improved livelihood conditions has been well acknowledged (Clancy 2004)). Energy is required to provide basic human needs as well as serve as a catalyst to human and economic development. But in the West Africa sub-region as a whole, a critical challenge for the realization of sustainable development is energy poverty. Majority of women and men in the various countries of the sub-region are deprived of access to reliable and affordable energy services such as electricity and LPG, with about 80% of the rural and urban poor using traditional biomass mainly in the form of firewood and charcoal for cooking and heating. The Manor River Union (MRU) in particular experiences a high level of energy poverty in part due to the conflicts in the region which have tended to have adverse consequences on economic development, natural resources management and gender equality. There is a heavy reliance on biomass fuels for cooking, heating and ironing with very low access to modern fuels especially among rural and urban poor sections of the populations. Côte d’Ivoire has the highest national electricity access rate in the MRU sub-region, at 47.3% in 2009. But there are major gaps and gender inequalities in access among urban and urban poor communities. Guinea has seen a growth in its electricity access rate from 12.5% in 1996 to 18% in 2009, with an access rate of 45% and 3% in urban and rural areas respectively. Liberia also has a low electrification rate, with only 10% of the total population being connected to electricity, while less than 2% of the rural population has access. Rural electrification is mostly reached through self-generation using relatively expensive imported fuel. Sierra Leone on its part has seen a growth in its national access to electricity from 10% in 2004 and to 15% in 2009. But only 0.1% of the country’s rural population had access in 2007. With increasing urbanization, it is expected that slum areas will swell and impact negatively on urban access to electricity.

The combined population in the four countries (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Ivory Coast) is estimated at around 40 million. Over half of this number live in rural and urban poor communities and depend on natural resources for sustaining their livelihoods. This means that their continued lack of access to adequate and reliable modern energy services has negative implications for economic development, health, education and gender equality. The urgency for addressing the energy specific needs and concerns of women and men on an equal basis can therefore not be over-emphasised.

Generally it has been noted that women and men with little or no access to energy are poorer than those with energy access. They are also usually less productive, face heavier work, and are more exposed to health risks and lack the benefits of modern technologies and communication (Picolliti and Taillant 2010). Relatedly, the experience of energy poverty is gendered. Even as both poor women and men experience energy poverty, women are much more affected as their access to energy resources and benefits is worsened by existing and changing unequal gender relations (Kohlin et al 2011). Generally women's needs, perspectives and interests have tended to be excluded from energy policy and practice resulting in a situation where the resolution of women's specific energy requirements and needs are either subsumed or given a lower level priority in sub-regional and national level decision-making. This state of affairs is further worsened by the near absence of women in energy policy planning and decision-making. Even though each of the countries in the MRU has put in place some legislation to protect the rights of women, implementation is slow given the different levels of commitment to gender equality in each of the countries.

3.0 Empowering Women Through Energy Access

Through the Conference on "Women's Empowerment through Energy Access", and the development and adoption of an MRU Action Plan on Women's Empowerment through Energy Access, the MRU is showing a clear commitment to tackling the energy issue from a gender perspective. In doing this, it would be critical to locate the gender and energy issue within the whole framework of the realization of women's rights and gender equality; examining the barriers and opportunities for realizing women's energy rights; and identifying the links and entry points for increasing women's voice, participation and leadership at all levels on local, regional and international commitments to gender equality and energy access.

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