

## Outcome Paper

### Roundtable on Renewable Energy and Gender Justice

26th November 2020

#### Introduction

Global dependence on fossil-fuels is driving a climate crisis which threatens human rights on an unparalleled scale. Due to pre-existing inequalities and gender stereotypes, many women and girls face disproportionate climate impacts on their health, safety, food and water security and livelihoods. This is in part because they make up the majority of the world's poor, they are more dependent for their livelihoods on natural resources that are threatened by climate change, they have unequal rights and access to land, resources and decision-making processes, less political voice and often have limited mobility due to their care giving roles. Intersecting forms of discrimination compound these factors, such that disadvantaged or marginalised women and girls are affected to a greater degree or in different ways. Therefore, halting global warming by transitioning to a low-carbon economy, is both a human rights and a women's rights imperative.

A transition to renewable energy sources is one of the primary means through which States are reducing greenhouse gas emissions in order to halt dangerous climate change. This energy transformation will have implications for women's rights, both in terms of opportunities to advance gender equality and reshape the energy sector so that it better aligns with the needs, interests and rights of women, and also the possibility of adverse impacts on women's rights. To ensure that the energy transition reflects women's perspectives and responds to, and does not undermine, their rights, women's perspectives, analyses and demands must be heard and taken into account in the design and implementation of the renewable energy transition.

To discuss these issues, on the 26<sup>th</sup> November 2020 members of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls (WGDAG) participated in a roundtable discussion with the representatives of a range of civil society organisations that work on women's rights, renewable energy and climate justice. The roundtable was organised by GI-ESCR and FES and co-sponsored by IWRAW-AP and APWLD.

The roundtable discussion sought to deepen the human rights analysis of what a just energy transition means for women's rights. The present paper summarises the key themes that arose from the discussion.

### Part I: Advancing gender equality through renewable energy

In the first half of the roundtable, participants explored avenues through which the transition to renewable energy may be capitalised upon as an opportunity to advance gender justice. The following represent some of the most important ideas that emerged.

#### ***Women have energy needs and responsibilities that differ from those of men***

Participants in the round table consistently stressed that women and men have differentiated energy needs and responsibilities that must be addressed in a just transition.

This is perhaps most readily apparent in poor rural communities in the Global South, where, in the absence of grid-based electricity, it is women that shoulder the burden of collecting the natural energy resources used for cooking, heating and lighting. Both **Marisa Hutchinson** (IWRAP-AP) and **Magi Matinga** (ENERGIA) emphasised the onerous nature of this work, as well as the fact that the collection and use of biomass exposes women to violence and pollution-related health risks, and the time burden limits their opportunities to engage in education, employment and political discussions or community governance.

**Irene González Pijuan** (Engineers Without Borders, Spain) highlighted the gendered nature of energy poverty and reminded us that gendered energy needs are not limited to the Global South. She gave an example of her work in Catalonia, where 70% of those asking for help to pay energy bills were women, who were often more dependent on household energy services due to the fact that they have much greater unpaid care responsibilities. This underscores the importance of providing energy as a public service which can guarantee affordable access for all, including those without paid work.

**Hilary Gbedemah** (CEDAW) reflected on the way that these differentiated care and energy responsibilities could be addressed by the provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (ICEDAW), such as articles 1 and 2, which concern the rights to non-discrimination and equality, article 5, which concerns stereotypes of the role of women and article 14 regarding the rights of rural women.

***If responsive to women's contexts and needs, renewable energy projects can make a significant contribution to advancing the social and economic rights of women***

A number of participants identified avenues through which carefully designed and implemented renewable energy projects may bring both short-term and long-term improvements to the lives of women by addressing energy poverty.

**Marisa Hutchinson**, for example, highlighted several ways in which reliable renewable energy devices can have an immediate impact on the daily lives of women by reducing drudgery and making chores more efficient, freeing up more time for employment and education. Dependable street lighting could also have an immediate effect by improving safety and lowering incidences of gender-based violence.

**Magi Matinga** outlined a series of longer-term benefits that renewable energy access may bring. For example in relation to women's right to health, she stressed that reliable lighting systems may improve health outcomes by ensuring women can access maternal healthcare during the night, whilst a charged mobile phone can prove an invaluable source of information concerning reproductive health, improving women's agency and their capacity to make informed life decisions.

**Magi Matinga** also made the point that a gender-responsive approach to energy policy is essential to ensure women's energy needs are prioritised. Directing renewable energy resources towards the most "productive" businesses such as irrigation and carpentry, could result in the entrenchment of inequality, as it is men that tend to own both the land and the equipment in these areas. If renewable energy is to make the most difference to women's economic lives it must be focused upon areas where women are more likely to have businesses, which in many contexts is areas related to cooking and the sale of food.

***The transition to renewable energy generates opportunities for advancing women's economic empowerment***

It was widely agreed that the transition to renewable energy must contribute towards the economic empowerment of women.

**Marisa Hutchinson** explained that women can play a significant role in the direct distribution of renewable energy devices in their communities, but lamented the fact that they often face challenges securing finance and building the business skills and networks necessary to succeed. This was reinforced in the presentation of **Ndivile Mokoena**, who shared the work of her organisation GenderCC, training and supporting independent women entrepreneurs in poor urban communities in South Africa. These entrepreneurs – known as "REED Advisors" – are helped to sell sustainable energy products such as solar

chargers and lighting, a job that women are often well suited for due to their role as primary household energy providers and users. As part of the project, GenderCC raises awareness of climate change, the harms of fossil-fuels and the benefits of renewable energy, at the same time as providing an income for women living in communities with high unemployment.

**Marisa Hutchinson** also raised the prospect of renewable energy being integrated into existing livelihoods, pointing out that increasing access to renewable energy can be used to support women's productive enterprises such as sewing, agricultural production and food processing. **Abeer Butmeh** concurred, drawing from her experience as a representative of the organisation PENGON in Palestine, which has supported community-based initiatives aimed at increasing the use of renewable energies in women's small-scale manufacturing and agricultural enterprises. She gave the example of solar powered irrigation pumps for strawberry producers and heating and cooling devices for women's food processing businesses. She stressed that enterprises that adopted solar sources found their energy bills decrease, allowing women to increase their income. PENGON also builds the capacity of Palestinian women to engage in local and national energy discussions and processes.

**Hilary Gbedemah** (CEDAW) commented that we should be careful to ensure that increasing energy provision does not worsen the work load of women by simply adding economic responsibilities to their already heavy care burdens. She added that there is a certain irony to the fact that the more onerous, downstream application of renewable energy tends to be left for women whilst upstream, technologically advanced jobs in the renewables sector, are dominated by men. If the potential of renewable energy is to be maximised, these inequalities must be addressed.

***A gender-just transition can only occur with the full and genuine participation of women***

Participants were in broad agreement that energy policy currently overlooks the needs of women. **Irene González Pijuan** pointed out that the transition to renewable energy, to be gender-just, must be more than a change in energy technology – it must change the energy model to one that is more democratic, publicly controlled and that serves economic and social justice for all, particularly women. **Dipti Bhatnagar** (Friends of the Earth, Mozambique) concurred, adding that a change in the *source* of energy does not automatically lead to a change in *ownership*: the green transition will be insufficient if it perpetuates the structural exclusion of women.

**Magi Matinga** agreed and stressed that this must involve listening to voices from the ground without packaging these voices into a pre-determined agenda. This resonated with the comments of **Nahla Haidar** (CEDAW), who underscored the fact that women have crucial knowledge about how energy policies are best implemented and must participate in

their design from the outset, instead of being invited in at the end of decision-making, for window dressing. This will require that women are not simply viewed as consumers, or victims, but – in the words of **Dipti Bhatnagar** – as “political subjects and protagonists.”

The roundtable generated a rich variety of examples concerning the political empowerment of women and measures that can be taken to ensure that their voices and energy demands are heard. Amongst these: **Abeer Butmeh** provided the example of a national committee in Palestine which lobbied in favour of gender sensitive energy policies; **Ndivile Mokoena** discussed GenderCC’s work to train women so as they can engage with government consultations on energy and climate policy; and **Irene González Pijuan** described her experience with energy democracy and participative assemblies which are designed to ensure that energy is understood as a public good for collective benefit.

## Part II: Protecting women’s rights in renewable energy projects

The second part of the roundtable explored the threats that large scale renewable energy projects posed to women’s rights, as well as the ways in which those harms could be mitigated and remedied. The following key discussion points emerged.

### *The growth of the renewable energy sector has resulted in serious threats to the rights of women living close to the projects*

The roundtable heard two testimonies from Global South women who had direct experience of the harm that renewable energy projects can cause when they disregard the views and rights of local communities. The first of these was provided by the Mexican indigenous human rights defender **Guadalupe Ramírez Castellanos**, who spoke of her experience struggling against the construction of large-scale windfarms in her community of Unión Hildago, Mexico. Amongst the harms to women’s rights, Ms Castellanos described: the way in which women had been excluded from the process of consultation; how the installation of wind-turbines had threatened the cultural life of the community by restricting access to the resources they needed for traditional cooking; and how the operation of the wind-park caused such noise pollution that the windows of houses situated next to turbines now vibrate.

**Titi Soentoro** (Aksi) presented testimony from an Indonesian woman named **Kasmawati**, who had also experienced the construction of wind-turbines in her community. Despite the fact that **Guadalupe** and **Kasmawati** live many thousands of miles apart, there was a remarkable – and concerning – similarity between their two testimonies. **Kasmawati** described the way in which the renewable energy company installing the turbines provided very little information to the local community about their activities, how the company’s

control of agricultural land had displaced community members who depended on it for their economic livelihoods, and how the wind-turbines had caused disruptive noise pollution for those that remained.

As **Titi Soentoro** pointed out, these testimonies reflect the fact that large-scale renewable energy projects – not only wind farms, but also solar, geothermal, hydropower and oil palm plantations for agrofuels – often come with a determination to be built at any cost, leading to serious violations of human and women’s rights. What begins as “clean” energy turns dirty and destructive in the eyes of the communities that suffer.

***Women human rights defenders who push back against renewable projects often face harassment and violence***

**Joie Chowdhury** (ESCR-NET) highlighted the condition of women human rights defenders who struggle against these threats to their rights, who are often dismissed as anti-green energy and face violence from both corporations and their own communities. This resonated strongly with the testimony of **Guadalupe Ramírez Castellanos**, who described how a renewable energy company’s decision to negotiate with a small group of landowners in her community of Unión Hidalgo, Mexico, had led to tensions and a climate of violence. The women that have stood against this and organised to claim their rights, have been harassed and told that their place is at home, taking care of their children.

***Many of the threats that the renewable energy sector poses to women’s rights are a result of an extractivist, profit-driven model, inherited from the fossil-fuel sector***

**Kavita Naidu** (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development) underscored that indigenous and women of color, in the Global South in all their diversities have historically and systematically been exploited to serve the needs of the energy sector, which has traditionally been in the control of a handful of transnational corporations. These women have not reaped the benefits by accessing energy simply by flipping a switch. ‘Just transitions’ is about moving away from fossil fuel dependence, but also dismantling the patriarchal, neoliberal, neocolonial and imperialist oppressive systems to ensure the full realization of human rights securing livelihoods and co-existing symbiotically with our natural environment.

Many participants emphasised that clean renewable energy cannot operate on the extractivist and profit-driven logic of the fossil fuel industry, which – as **Verónica Vidal** (ProDESC) pointed out – is capitalist in nature and produces energy for the sole purpose of maximising profit. In the words of **Titi Soentoro**, if “business as usual” is allowed to prevail and the green transition is not accompanied by a transformation in the behaviour of energy

companies, we can expect the exploitation and dispossession of women to become further entrenched.

In order to ensure that there is a break with this extractivist logic, both **Verónica Vidal** and **Melissa Upreti** (WGDAWG) drew attention to the importance of building a powerful counternarrative that is feminist and intersectional, with a message that is clear, popular and capable of attracting public support. **Kavita Naidu** added that the current just transition narrative must be deeper than adopting a gender perspective: it must relate to a form of feminist energy justice that radically transforms the racist, sexist and capitalist socio-economic systems that underly energy insecurity and poverty.

### ***Fighting back: avenues of accountability and the role of Geneva-based human rights mechanisms***

Several of the participants also reflected on different institutional routes to accountability, as well as the role that Geneva-based human rights mechanisms could play in this regard.

**Verónica Vidal**, for example, described how the Unión Hidalgo community, is suing EDF – a large multinational French energy company – before a civil court in Paris under the French Law of Vigilance, with the goal of preventing the construction of the wind-park in Mexico. Both **Verónica Vidal** and **Dorothy Estrada Tanck** (WGDAWG) also spoke of the importance of ensuring that a feminist perspective is incorporated into negotiations on a binding treaty on business and human rights, and called for the relationship between renewable energy and women’s rights to be considered as part of these discussions.

**Nahla Haidar** responded to the presentations on the situation of women human rights defenders by reflecting on the role that the CEDAW Committee could play in this context. She pointed out that she is the Rapporteur on reprisals for CEDAW and stressed that all too often the Committee only finds out about women human rights defenders when it is too late and people have already been hurt or killed. She urged civil society to provide the Committee with more information on women environmental activists and the harmful impacts that the renewable energy is causing. She stressed the importance of both civil society and treaty bodies remaining vigilant in this regard.

**Dorothy Estrada Tanck** suggested that the capacity of the Human Rights Treaty Bodies to issue structural recommendations in decisions on individual communications, could prove useful for addressing future violations, in cases concerning environmental harm.

**Heisoo Shin** (member of the CESCR) highlighted the fact that the CESCR is in the process of developing a General Comment on Sustainable Development and these topics are very

relevant to that initiative. She invited engagement in the forthcoming regional consultations to discuss the content of the General Comment.

**Melissa Upreti** underscored the importance of building a complementary relationship between human rights mechanisms and civil society. She outlined a range of ways that the WGDAWG could support the work of women’s organisations, such as through their thematic reports, country visits, and complaints procedure. She suggested that the mandate’s recent report on “Women’s Human Rights in the Changing World of Work” may prove useful for future advocacy relating to women’s livelihoods in the renewable energy sector.

### Conclusion

Members of the CEDAW, the CESCR and the WGDAWG welcomed the rich discussion and stressed that the work of Geneva-based human rights mechanisms are ultimately dependent on women’s organisations bringing matters such as these to their attention.

Participants widely agreed that the intersection between renewable energy and women’s rights raised a number of pressing issues, especially in terms of the way that the renewable energy industry perpetuated a logic of extractivism and dispossession. At the same time, participants were clear that there were numerous openings through which renewable energy provision could empower women, particularly in the context of “building back better” following the COVID-19 pandemic.

As **Melissa Upreti** concluded, it is vital that we now start to think about how to build a public discourse on advancing women’s rights in the transition to renewable energy, and “have more conversations where we can learn from each other, and support each other.”