Gender Equity and Mainstreaming in Renewable Energy Policies - Empowering Women in the Energy Value Chain in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

Monica Maduekwe[a], Ellen Morris[b], Jennye Greene[b], Victoria Healey[c+]

[a]ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE), Praia, Cabo Verde.
[b]Sustainable Energy Solutions, New York, U.S.A
[c]National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), Denver, U.S.A

Abstract

a) **Purpose of review:** Using practice theories as the analytical framework, this paper assesses the potential of the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) first ever regional Policy on Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access to produce the desired behavioural changes envisioned.

b) **Recent findings:** The policy came to fruition after a multi-year, multi-stakeholder effort of research, advocacy, and consensus building, all spearheaded by an institution of the Community, the ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE). The success of the ECOWAS policy has led to the development of a related regional level legal instrument, monitoring protocols, institutional evolutions, as well as replication efforts in other African regions.

c) **Summary:** The policy's provisions were aimed at changing the mind-sets, and eventually behaviours, of actors concerned and were designed thus in order to increase its chances of successful implementation, however the onus lies on the constituent governments of the Community to provide incentives for its full and effective implementation in order to guarantee its success.

Keywords: Gender-responsive energy policies; Women's empowerment; ECOWAS; Energy access; Gender equality

[+] Corresponding author: *Tel: +1 720 402 1107*
E-mail address: Victoria.Healey@nrel.gov

1. Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS or the Community) is a regional economic community (REC) comprised of fifteen West African countries[1], established with the aim to "promote co-operation and integration …in order to raise the living standards of its peoples, and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations-among Member States and contribute to the progress and development of the African Continent" (ECOWAS Treaty, 1993). Energy is one of the key sectors identified in the ECOWAS Treaty as a priority sector for achieving the development objectives of the Community[2].

ECOWAS countries have struggled with achieving a well-functioning energy sector[3]. Nevertheless, the region has made considerable strides vis-à-vis its energy challenges, which have proved to be one of the greatest obstacles to sustainable economic growth and inclusive development. The governments of ECOWAS Member States, recognizing the importance of having an enabling environment for promoting investment in the sustainable energy sector, developed clean energy policies, programs, and partnerships all within the framework of the Regional Economic Community (REC), the second such community to be established after the European Union (EU).

In June 2017, the ECOWAS Heads of State met to adopt a first-of-its-kind regional policy focused on empowering the region's female population to have an active stake in West Africa's energy sector. The impetus for the policy was threefold: 1) men and women in the community typically exhibited distinct patterns of energy needs, levels of access, and impacts, 2) significant aspects of the Community's energy policy and institutional architecture were gender blind, and 3) women represent a significant untapped pool of workers, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers that could be positively contributing to the regional transition to cleaner, more just, and more sustainable energy systems.

The objective of this paper is to review the design and success factors of the policy using practice theories as the analytical framework to assess the potential of the policy to bring about the envisioned change in the region. The next section (section 2) discusses the work done by ECOWAS governments to account for gender in their past energy policies. To explain why this was not considered sufficient and, hence, the governments' decision to develop and adopt a gender-specific energy policy to guide their activities in the sector, section 3 describes why the normal practice of having a few aspirational

[1] Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania was formerly part of the community.

[2] Access to modern energy services is a critical part of alleviating poverty and promoting economic growth and social development. To a large extent, developed economies have achieved their status by changing the sort of fuels and technologies predominately relied on from basic and unrefined to advanced and more efficient, as structural changes in an economy creates a demand for the sort of energy resources and technologies that can drive that transformation (IEA, 2017).

[3] A well-functioning energy sector is based on its ability to continuously adapt to provide modern energy services which are technically available, affordable, adequate (in volume and quality), acceptable (in line with social and cultural factors as well as environmental goals) and reliable (can be used when needed); factors which are of relevance to both low and high income countries (IEA, 2017), and more so for ECOWAS countries.

statements on gender mainstreaming and women empowerment included in energy policies is not enough to bring about the required changes. Following that, section 4 contains a review of the literature on practice theories and situates the ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in energy Access within this framework to assess how, through its implementation, it could pave the way to a new form of practice that fosters women's empowerment—defined by O'Hara and Clement (2018) as both economic freedom (increased ability to generate income) and agency (increased role in decision-making)—in the energy value chain and the policy process. In general, the authors present arguments which would demonstrate that the ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access has the capacity to lead to concrete transformations for women as active participants in the energy sector. The final sections of the paper discuss the lessons learned in the development process of the policy and areas that need to be strengthened moving forward.

2. ECREEE as a specialized agency to promote sustainable and inclusive development in West Africa

The ECOWAS region has one of the lowest energy access rates globally, with countries facing challenges relating to high levels of energy poverty, energy security concerns and climate change impacts (EREP, 2013). It is well known that these challenges are hindering the region's economies from fully exploiting their economic potential. It was against this backdrop that the Heads of State, at the ECOWAS Conference for Peace and Security, held in November 2007, expressed the need for a regional centre whose mandate would be to promote markets for renewable energy and energy efficiency within the region and exploit the region's vast renewable energy potential (ECREEE, 2011). The ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE) became operational in 2010[4], soon thereafter developing the ECOWAS Regional Policy for Renewable Energy (EREP) and the ECOWAS Energy Efficiency Policy (EEEP). These policies were developed and adopted by the ECOWAS Energy Minsters in 2012 and adopted by the Presidents of the fifteen countries at the 43rd Ordinary Session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, in Abuja, Nigeria, on 18 July 2013 (EREP, 2013; EEEP, 2013).

As energy policies, EREP and EEEP are directly aligned with ECREEE's overall objective, which is "to contribute to the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of West Africa by improving access to modern, reliable and affordable energy services, energy security and reduction of energy related externalities (GHG, local pollution)" (ECREEE, 2011)[5]. It is important to note that these two energy policies reflect the issue of promoting women's participation in the energy sector through the policies' implementation process. For example, EEEP recognizes that women are a key target group for the design and implementation of energy efficiency policies and that the

[4] ECREEE was established with the support of the ECOWAS Commission and the Austrian and Spanish Governments, as well as technical assistance from UNIDO. ECREEE was formally inaugurated with a ceremony conducted by His Excellency José Maria Neves, Prime Minister of Cape Verde, and the President of the ECOWAS Commission, His Excellency James Gbeho, at its headquarters in Praia, Cape Verde, on 6 July 2010.

[5] Furthermore, the targets of each of these policies build on and further the Regional Policy on Access to Energy Services for Populations in Rural and Peri-urban Areas for Poverty Reduction in line with achieving the MDGs in Member States, adopted at 29th Summit of the Authority of Heads of State and Government in Niamey, Niger, on 12 January 2006. Some of the targets included ensuring that 60% of the rural population had access to productive energy services and that 100% of the population will have access to modern cooking fuels by 2015.

underrepresentation of women in the energy sector needed to be considered in the formulation of capacity building initiatives on energy efficiency (EEEP, 2013). EREP, on the other hand, identifies its policy actions as a vehicle to promote a gender-balanced energy sector in ECOWAS, creating jobs and employment opportunities for both men and women in the green energy sector (EREP, 2013). One of the guiding principles of EREP's implementation is "support for gender equality" and one of its objectives is "mainstreaming gender in renewable energy related issues, particularly those associated with women's productive roles."

IUCN (2017) assessed energy policies around the globe based on the extent gender considerations appear in policy documents and in the manner in which women are presented (i.e., whether as beneficiaries or agents of change). By international and regional standards, EREP and EEEP perform well as they both address gender issues and include gender equality as an explicitly stated aim.

However, ECOWAS Member States wanted to go even further and, with support from ECREEE, work was started to design an energy-gender policy. The ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access is the first regional policy framework specifically developed to advance women's participation in the energy value chain (SEforALL, 2017, p. 52). The Policy was adopted by the Heads of State at the 51st Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS, on the 4th of June 2017, in Monrovia, Liberia. A legal framework for implementation, the ECOWAS Directive on Gender Assessments in Energy Projects, crafted to support one of the Policy's pillars was developed and adopted by the ECOWAS Energy Experts[6] the same year. Both the Policy and the Directive are firmly inscribed within the ECOWAS regional goal of achieving universal energy access by 2030, with recognition that the West African female population has an active stake in the success of these policies and that they should be empowered to play active roles (ECOWGEN, 2017).

3. Challenges with following through on commitments on gender mainstreaming in energy and rationale for a gender-responsive policy

Energy policies in West Africa, and EU development policies that guide relations between the Union and West African countries[7], have historically included sections on "gender" and/ or "cross-cutting issues". These policies recognize the burden on women due to energy poverty in West Africa, but they fall short. These well-meaning policies have had limited success fostering the gender agenda. Explaining why, Allwood (2013) talks of evidence of "policy evaporation," meaning that "commitments to gender equality evaporate before development policy hits the ground." Allwood identifies limited resources as a key factor behind the poor track record, and, adding to this, she notes limited knowledge and understanding (Allwood, 2013). In addition, the present paper argues that there is something even more fundamental driving and sustaining the status quo, this we refer to as

[6] The Directive will be read and considered by the ECOWAS Energy Ministers, the Council of Ministers and finally in the Heads of State of ECOWAS as at when due, after which it will go in force.

[7] For instance, EU development policy such as the Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) has an objective of integrating gender and cross-cutting issues. Also the Cotonou Agreement (2000) States that "systematic account shall be taken of the situation of women and gender issues in all area…" Elaborating this point, the Agreement makes mention of strengthing policies and programmes that promote equal participation of men and women, and increase women's access to resources, amongst others.

"practice." Drawing from the practice theories scholarship[8], Reckwitz (2002) defines practice as "a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge." He notes that "practice" is an accepted way of speaking or doing things, by the agent who executes and those who observe (Reckwitz, 2002), and, by extension, to those the action is directed to.

Practice theories are particularly relevant to the energy sector, and more so for gender issues. The energy sector, specifically how progress is reported (the use of gender-neutral data in reporting energy access), how interventions are designed and implemented (lack of attention to gender norms and the legacy of gender roles) as well as how priorities are established, has a routinized and stylized way of maintaining the status quo of an energy sector where gender mainstreaming goals continue to exist mainly as political rhetoric rather than being an instrument for promoting gender equality. It is important to stress that moving from pledges to real transformation starts with recognizing what these obstructing social practices are, otherwise referred to as gender-related barriers. ECOWAS' Programme on Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access (ECOW-GEN) identifies three primary spheres in which these social practices play out—at the level of the energy consumer, energy supplier and at the political level—where the most intractable barriers lie (ECOWGEN, 2017).

3.1. Barriers at the energy consumer level

Changing the practices at this level starts with recognizing women (and female-headed households) as energy consumers, and understanding that there could be factors beyond their control which limit their capacity to make decisions over their energy choices. For example, growth in aggregate electrification rates may be masking discrepancies at the household level, for example if female-headed households tend to access grid electricity at a lower rate than their male counterparts (ECREEE, 2015). This dynamic, however, is often obscured by globally reported, gender non-disaggregated figures of energy access. For instance, the much cited IEA (2017) reports that from 2010 – 2017, the population of West Africa without energy access has stabilized at 52% as new grid connections and decentralized renewables have managed to keep up with population growth. This, however, does not tell the full story of who has access to modern energy services and whether or not that access is propagating (or mitigating) patterns of spatial inequality (i.e., between urban and rural dwellers), gender inequality, or other types of inequality.

It is important to note that the energy needs of men and women present in the same household can differ. A study on energy consumption by gender in selected European countries show that men and women tend to have different preferences for energy use and tend to consume energy at different rates (Raty and Carlsson-Kanyama, 2009). From a survey in five sub-Saharan African countries, small businesses as energy consumers also have been found to exhibit gender-linked preferences in energy products, mainly as a result of the different types of businesses that men and women tend to run (Alstone et al., 2011). Hence, it is problematic for either the public or private sector to treat energy consumers as a homogenous group undifferentiated by gender roles.

[8] Andreas Reckwitz (2002) paper entitled, "Towards a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing," provides an in-depth analysis on Practice Theory and its place in the social theory scholarship, drawing from the work of notable social theorists such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Latour and others.

3.2. Barriers at the energy supplier level

There is generally a low representation of women in the energy industry, specifically in management and technical positions where they can be influential in defining and benefiting from investments in the energy sector. A range of gender-specific barriers are facing women, including limited participation in the formal employment sector; more difficulty accessing financing for launching and scaling up a business; fewer opportunities for technical and business training and education; and a smaller number of women champions to mentor younger women entering the energy sector. Addressing the issue starts with recognizing the role that social norms play in presenting the sector as a male business and how this in turn influences the educational choices of women. Clancy and Roehr (2003) observe that even in European countries women working in the energy industry are more likely to be found in lower level administration, sales, finance and catering than in technical or decision-making roles, as the energy industry is considered a male domain. The lack of technical capacity is a limiting factor in the private sector where successful entrepreneurs tend to be those with the necessary training and qualifications in their field of business (ECREEE, 2015; ECOWGEN, 2017).

Similar energy sector occupational segregation is present in the decision-making and administrative functions in ECOWAS countries where women tend to occupy supporting roles in energy ministries, except for Nigeria, where 47% of technical staff members are women and 53% men, and in Senegal where women led three of the five directorates within the energy ministry (ECREEE, 2015). Although the importance of having women in higher level, decision-making roles has been expressed in ECOWAS regional and national energy policy frameworks, the challenge remains the lack of potential female hires with the requisite higher education and technical qualifications. With fewer women graduating from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic fields, the female labour supply for technical positions in the energy ministries is much smaller compared to the number of qualified male applicants (ECOWGEN, 2017).

3.3. Barriers at the political level

As Clancy and Roehr (2003) note a sector dominated by one gender group is likely to produce policies and make political decisions that reflect the needs and interests of that gender group, opposed to one where the varying needs of all are integrated.

This argument is supported by findings made by Swim et al. (2018), which reveals that the way policy arguments are framed is influenced by the dominant gender group involved it its development. According to their research, men tend to prefer policy arguments focused on science and business over ethical and justice issues. Furthermore, as men tend to occupy positions of political and social influence, the policies developed to address environmental issues tend to reflect these preferences (Swim, et al., 2018). The issue with this, they argue, is that the way a policy is framed may select who is included in the decision-making process as well as what are considered as priorities for policy implementation (Swim et al., 2018). ECOWGEN (2017) recognizes and is addressing barriers to gender equality at the political level. Solving the challenges at the political level is particularly critical to addressing the issues at the energy consumer level and at the energy supplier level, if the cycle of gender inadequate policies is to be broken to give way to real changes.

Swim et al., (2018) and others, like Raty and Carlsson-Kanyama (2010), Tjorring (2016), Permana et al. (2015), argue for an increased representation of women in the development process of sustainable development and/or energy interventions to ensure that they are designed to adequately accommodate the needs of the male and female stakeholders and beneficiaries of the intervention.

However, the ECOWAS region has remained traditionally gender-stratified whereby males on average have greater access than females to the resources and opportunities in society. For example, women continue to be underrepresented at the political and economic leadership levels of the region. Women occupy only 14.5 percent of parliamentary seats in ECOWAS Member States (ranging from 7 percent in Nigeria's lower house to 42 percent in Senegal's upper house) compared to a global average of 18.4 percent and 18.2 percent in sub-Saharan Africa (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015).

Whether in the public or private sector, having more women engaged in energy debates, planning, and implementation would require a paradigm shift of practice. This would have to occur at an elemental level where the energy sector ceases to be viewed as a predominantly male purview, and behaviours evolve towards promoting both equal representation and participation in the sector.

The prevailing practice in ECOWAS, composed of culturally produced gender-based discrepancies in energy use and access, marked occupational segregation in energy supply, and the lack of female voices and perspectives in relevant decision-making actions, has been documented by ECREEE (ECREEE 2015; ECOWGEN 2017). The next section, however, considers whether the process of creating a dedicated policy instrument, embedded within the Community itself, to address gender-energy gaps can move beyond rhetoric and begin to alter practice.

4. Shifting the paradigm through a regional policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access

"Practices should be considered seriously and the complexities of how a way of life can become a sustained 'style' should not be underestimated." Wang (2016)

Practices are temporal and spatially specific, manifesting in body (an accepted way of acting), mind (an understanding of the meaning of things or how things should be done), things (objects or resources used in performing a practice), knowledge (an accepted interpretation of actions or objects and an understanding of the world, shaped by history and culture), language (an accepted interpretation of what is meant by what is spoken or written), the social structure (routines followed when acting, speaking or using things) and the agents/individuals (carriers of a practice who understand the meaning of that practice and how it should be executed) (Reckwitz, 2002).

In many societies, being female equates to fulling the societal role of caregiver/mother (Wang, 2016). It is not surprising that female education tends to focus on areas that prepare women in fulfilling that role in the society. In countries where societal norms frown on women working in male associated sectors, being trained in fields related to technical or engineering is seen to be outside the spheres of traditional areas women receive training in, whereas courses related to garment, food and service sectors, which are linked to women's societal role as caregivers, continue to see a high preference from women (UNESCO, 2011). After training, as should be expected, the sectors women work in remain in line with this societal expectation. In Nigeria, for example, women entrepreneurs tend to be concentrated in a few sectors namely: food, garment and retail services (Bardasi, 2008).

Going contrary to the accepted practice comes with challenges: A solar photovoltaic trainer in Liberia struggled with enrolling women in a vocational training workshop organised throughout the country (cited in ECREEE, 2015; page 75). Furthermore, women who may have undergone the required training and possess the necessary qualifications may still face social cultural barriers to performing their work, especially when the work comes with a style of dressing (like wearing overalls) and activities (like climbing up a roof or electric pole) that is associated with being masculine (ECREEE, 2015, page 81).

Notwithstanding, practices, by their very nature[9], are inclined to change (Reckwitz, 2002), and this occurs through a process of innovation where agents associate a new meaning to elements that already exist and as more people adopt this new way of understanding and doing things, with time an old practice, due to the absence of carriers, dies off (Ropke, 2009). Drawing from the social practice theory, Labanca and Bertoldi (2018) argue this process of innovation occurs by modifying how people act, speak and the mental understanding that drives how they do these things.

It can be argued that the ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access contains actions with the potential to facilitate this sort of modification by working specifically on tackling gender and energy challenges at the political level, the energy supplier level and at the energy consumer level, through an energy policy framed to empower women by improving their ability to establish successful energy businesses and their capacity to contribute to decision-making processes that influence energy programmes and investment decisions. The policy, in many ways, works to improve women's agency using the energy sector as the instrument of change. World Bank (2012) describes agency as the ability of an individual, whether male or female, to take advantage of the resources available to them to harness economic opportunities and, by so doing, create value (positive outcomes) for themselves. The study argues that women's ability to earn their own income has a positive effect on their agency, and that this in turn "increases their bargaining power within the household and their ability to accumulate autonomous assets" (World Bank, 2012). The same study warns that social norms (or practices) have a direct influence on women's agency[10].

It is in recognition of these that the policy establishes objectives directed at changing the a) mind-set associated with women in energy through awareness campaigns b) practices through which priorities for energy investment are set, c) the role of women in decision-making and d) the role of women in energy businesses. Furthermore, each of these objectives collectively works to change the norms that confines women's agency, increase women's access to resources as well as the power for them to make use of these resources.

The ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access has the following objectives:

1. **Achieve widespread understanding of energy and gender considerations at all levels of society**: the policy recognizes this as the foundation to achieving the rest of the policy objectives. At the heart of this policy objective is behavioural change through changing perceptions of all stakeholders concerning gender and energy. This is a useful first step for later encouraging women to enter the energy sector and step into decision-making roles, from the household to the ministerial levels. The emphasis here is on public campaigns, educational programs, research and the production of scientific evidence,

[9] Reckwitz (2002) argues that the routinized nature of practices makes them wont to "breaking" or "shifting".

[10] See page 150 in the World Development Report 2012 published by the World Bank.

with national governments taking the lead to create a local environment that understands the importance of and contributes to transforming the energy industry to one that is a vehicle for promoting gender equality.

2. **Ensure that all energy policies, programmes and initiatives, including large energy infrastructures and investments, are non-discriminatory, gender-inclusive, gender-balanced and directed towards addressing inequalities, particularly energy poverty, differentially affecting men and women in the region:** In line with objective 1, this objective creates the instruments through which gender equality goals can be achieved through the energy sector. First, it works to change the way energy access is measured. The policy includes actions on collecting energy data, disaggregated by sex, age and other socio-economic factors. Others include: establishing and empowering gender focal units in the energy ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) to provide oversight towards the implementation of gender responsive energy interventions; creating a feedback mechanism where the priorities of both male and female citizens can be heard, collected and acted upon. Embedded in this objective is the idea that more female agency is required during all phases of public sector energy development.
3. **Increase women's public sector participation in energy-related technical fields and decision-making positions:** this objective speaks directly to the idea of economic empowerment and focuses on increasing the number of females eligible for employment in technical positions in energy MDAs, supporting women to climb up the career ladders to occupy managerial positions and be involved in decision-making processes. The objective is concerned with encouraging more women to enter the sector as well as to stay in the sector. Specific policy actions include encouraging female educations in STEM fields, and creating career pathways to increase their employability.
4. **Ensure that women and men have equal opportunities to enter and succeed in energy-related fields in the private sector:** the aim here is to increase the number of women running energy businesses or being employed in the private sector, another objective concerning economic empowerment. The policy objective recognizes the challenges to women's participation as: capacity related barriers, access to finance and cultural related barriers.

5. Learning from the ECOWAS policy process

Being the first of its kind, it is important to recognize factors that led to its success. The ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access is both unique and innovative in linking up the key aspects of gender equality and energy access. The way that the expertise and priorities of two largely distinct issue area groups—energy and gender—were woven together to produce a transboundary, inter-sectoral policy can offer insights for the policy process in other parts of the world. Reflecting back on the three-year effort in ECOWAS—from the commitment to initiate the policy research, to its design, to the final adoption of the policy by 15 Heads of State—reveals challenges stemming from its interdisciplinary nature; the multiple governance levels at which approvals were required; and the need for flexibility to adapt processes along the way.

The national MDAs, in both gender and energy, possessed only limited awareness of, experience with, and human capacity related to energy and gender issue areas. Gender and energy was a new issue area, and ECREEE employed a number of strategies to build and empower coalitions of actors in this domain. From inception, ECREEE organized much of its effort around kernels of interest and expertise within energy MDAs, identifying or creating gender focal points and linking them together into a

transnational network. Close engagement with this group ensured policy work was responsive to Member States' development priorities and capabilities. It also created nodes of ownership within the existing energy architecture around which policy buy-in and internal support could be built. A key outcome of the policy was the enlargement of mostly single-person gender focal points in the energy MDAs to focal units consisting of three or more individuals with vested professional interest in supporting the policy provisions.

Policy development, however, didn't take shape only within the silo of energy MDAs. ECREEE enlisted the support of a fellow regional organ, the ECOWAS Department of Gender and Social Affairs, in an oversight role throughout the policy development process. This opened an avenue for technical inputs, quality control measures, a means for broadening the advocacy coalition, and enhanced credibility vis-à-vis decision-makers at the regional and national levels. ECREEE and the ECOWAS Department of Gender and Social Affairs not only possessed different subject matter expertise, but they also made the strategic decision to take on distinct but complementary operational roles during the policy process—a factor for success. ECREEE operated as the day-to-day project manager, having stronger professional connections with and technical capacity to "speak and engage" effectively with energy sector stakeholders about the net gains to be achieved as a result of creating more gender-aware energy operations.

ECREEE's selective reliance on external actors, notably development partners, funding partners, and technical experts, was also a factor in presenting a credible case for action to key decision-makers. External funding and in-kind contributions offered ECREEE the resources to pursue data driven research, consultation, outreach, and capacity building activities, creating an incubation ecosystem in which this first-of-a-kind policy and regulation development could take hold. High level external support also sent a signal to decision-makers regarding how the wider international community perceived the legitimacy of energy and gender issues, helping to create buy-in throughout the process. In particular, the detailed and heavily documented analysis presented by ECREEE on both the scope of gender disparities and win-win opportunities in the energy sector was instrumental in convincing the technocratic elements with energy MDAs to support policy action.

Each regional consultation conducted for the policy was gender balanced, which was key in integrating the perspectives, concerns and aspirations of both women and men. The participatory and transparent process by which the Policy came into existence established a first foundation for changing practice within ECOWAS, prior to any changes wrought by the Policy itself. This is evidenced by the fact that the group of national stakeholders validating the Policy called for the creation of a legal supporting regulation (the Directive) and this work commenced before the Policy was even adopted; simply augmenting the awareness and momentum of a group of key national stakeholders was sufficient to alter established practice.

At present, the policy achievements in ECOWAS are being studied—both content and process—with replication efforts underway in at least two other African regions (East African Community and Southern Africa Development Community). International organizations, such as AfDB, ADA, UNIDO, and agencies of U.S. Government, are attempting to serve as conduits, facilitating learning and diffusion of practice between ECOWAS and its counterparts elsewhere.

6. Limitations

The ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access was designed to be an implementing vehicle for the global sustainable development goals (SDG), specifically SDG 7 (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all) and SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), among others. The policy targets were therefore pegged to the global SDG targets, i.e. 2030, with midterm targets set for 2020.

Although a well-designed policy, the timelines set for achieving the policy objectives may have underestimated the length of time needed to finalize its adoption process (from being reviewed by the ECOWAS energy experts all the way to its adoption by the region's heads of state (which took two years), its translation into national policies/strategies, then actual on-the-ground implementation.

While working with such tight timelines have meant that regional implementation[11] began even before the policy was adopted by the ECOWAS Heads of State, fully achieving the policy's targets by 2030 may be a tall order. First, it would require significant human and financial resources from national governments. Second, closing the huge capacity/awareness gap might demand more time than the policy targets specify, especially with the implementation delay.

Even with these limitations, the bold action taken by the ECOWAS region to address a longstanding issue in the energy sector remains commendable and deserves the support of the international community and the region's development partners.

7. Conclusion

This paper discusses ECOWAS Member States' focus on achieving universal access to modern energy services while empowering women in the energy sector. Through the ECOWAS Policy for Gender Mainstreaming in Energy Access, member states seek to empower women throughout the value chain by changing social practices associated with women in energy. Using the Practice Theoretical Framework, the paper discusses enabling policies and efforts. This conceptual analysis shows that, like proponents of integrating gender practice in policy development have argued[12], the policy takes into consideration the existing culture and barriers to mainstreaming gender in energy. The policy goes further to develop specific actions in response to these barriers, starting with actions aimed at creating widespread awareness and support. Creating a fertile local environment that supports the achievement of policy goals is paramount. As Malen and Marcus (2017) show, increasing the local public's attention to the issues and gains of a sustainable energy policy can lead to the desired policy outcome.

[11] After the validation and adoption of the policy by the ECOWAS Energy Experts, ECREEE immediately designed projects to start implementation, focusing on awareness rising, capacity building, business development and investment promotion.

[12] Sanne (2002) argues that individuals are not free in their choices but that structural factors in societies influences these choices. This aligns with findings from Tjorring (2015) that shows how everyday gender practices influenced decisions related to energy renovations, calling for a new approach where people's way of living is the starting point of energy interventions.

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