Empowering change

International Institute for Sustainable Development

*Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri*, Director, Spaces for Change, Nigeria

*Laura Merrill*, Senior Researcher, IISD
A four-year programme focusing on gender and energy sector research is underway between Spaces for Change and IISD. In an interview with International Innovation, Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri and Laura Merrill discuss the pressing need to overcome gender inequalities in access to energy resources.

Could you outline the current gender equity issues relating to sustainable development that are facing the world today?

VIO: Gender equity is a central component of sustainable development. Within the Spaces for Change programme and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), there is a focus on gender issues specifically with regard to energy. In the project, we have concentrated on many gender issues in Nigeria, from rape and sexual violence, to abductions and conflict. We are now also working on the structural barriers in society that prevent the full participation of women in social and economic activities that could enable fairer and more sustainable development. Both anecdotal and statistical evidence make it clear that women experience many kinds of disadvantages and discrimination in energy, health, education and employment. The 2014 Human Development Index (HDI) values for women and men highlight clear disparities; the global female HDI value averages at around 0.8 per cent lower than the male HDI value. The results of the HDI survey involving women in 148 countries showed how women’s goals of empowerment and labour market participation continue to be eroded by gender inequality. The resulting disproportionately high levels of poverty among women remain a harrowing reality.

In Nigeria, nowhere are the consequences of gender inequity more manifest than in women’s poor access to energy services and resources, contributing to record-high levels of poverty and underdevelopment. In performing their traditional gender roles, women have more need for energy for domestic uses such as cooking, heating, laundry, cooling, lighting, storage etc. With 52 per cent of the population living without access to electricity, women bear a significant share of the burden of energy poverty – a situation compounded by lower literacy levels and income inequalities among women. More tellingly, the 4,500 megawatts of electricity Nigeria generates for its population of more than 170 million is grossly inadequate, adding to the burden on women. Spaces for Change is now working in Nigeria with IISD in order to better understand and document these gender-differentiated impacts of the energy sector, and proffer policy proposals that can help to build a more equitable society.

How does IISD approach gender equity problems?

LM: IISD is working with Spaces for Change in Nigeria and other partners across Bangladesh and India to understand the impacts on poor women and children during energy sector reforms. The work is both to learn and share lessons from countries that have managed this transition and removed fossil fuel subsidies, whilst also increasing access to cleaner fuels for women through a shift from ‘blanket’ or indiscriminate subsidies to those that are targeted at women. For example, clean cookstoves that include a chimney require small amounts of government or donor subsidies but can have positive outcomes for women’s health. Vouchers targeted at poor women for use with liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) can also have positive gender impacts. Time will be spent researching the impact of energy sector reform on gender in these countries and learning from other country approaches. The research programme runs for four years until the end of 2018; it is coordinated by ENERGIA and supported by the UK’s Department for International Development.

As of yet, it is unclear if ongoing reforms in the Nigerian energy sector, which are designed to achieve fiscal stability and adjust ineffective subsidies, will work to the benefit of women or otherwise. The government must consider that with the removal of subsidies to fossil fuels (such as in transport fuels) prices of petroleum products will rise, with likely direct (transport costs) and indirect (inflation) effects on society. Many countries have introduced successful cash transfers, often targeted at women – as is the case in India, Mexico and Brazil – during periods of increasing fuel and energy prices. These cash transfers are designed both to cushion the negative impacts of reform on the population and better target energy subsidies to poor families or those without access to clean cooking fuels. Nigeria has tried, with difficulty, to introduce such schemes in the past, but must keep trying to find a way to replicate positive experiences from other countries for the benefit of women. The danger is that without pro-active, gender-targeted energy safety nets within energy sector reform, household spending on fuel and dependence on biomass with rising fuel prices could increase for women.

The Institute provides policy advice on the social, economic and environmental impacts of gender inequalities across the world. To what extent do gender equity problems differ from country to country?

LM: Energy sector reform is extremely country and context specific, depending on the current energy mix and level and type of subsidies. Women in Saudi Arabia benefit little from huge subsidies to keep the cost of transport fuels low because they are not allowed to drive. Women in India who have no access to electricity, LPG or private transport fuels benefit little from huge subsidies to keep the cost of transport fuels low because they are not allowed to drive. Women in India who have no access to electricity, LPG or private transport benefit little from subsidies directed at these fuels. Therefore, women and men can be affected differently through changing prices in different fuel types. All governments need to look at the bigger picture within energy policy. Often, governments only focus on energy sector reform concerning fossil fuels, but they must also think about shifting investment towards renewables (solar home systems, clean biogas), public transport, energy efficiency, targeted stoves or vouchers for clean fuels (LPG stoves, clean cookstoves) and, ultimately, cash transfers directly targeted at poor women.

IISD is striving to achieve equitable access to necessary ecosystems that support basic life needs. What progress has been made so far on this? What are the key issues that remain to be overcome?
LM: Over the years, we have built progress on the back of a carbon-based economy, through industrialisation powered from coal, oil and gas. This has brought increasing wealth and progress to many, including women. But governments are realising that they must get better at targeting government resources where they make the most difference. Not only from a climate or pollution perspective, but also from a budgetary aspect. Blanket or indiscriminate subsidies to fossil fuels, which often benefit the rich, need to be removed and refocused towards those in society, particularly women, who need them the most. Many countries are reforming subsidies to fossil fuels, and some are reinvesting savings into cash transfers directed at women and families, or taxing fossil fuels to provide public revenues for health, education and infrastructure. Thinking through the gender implications of fiscal energy policies is key in this regard.

Another area of gender equity that IISD focuses on is gender balance in decision-making positions. Why is it important for women to be better represented in governing bodies that have the power to effect change in sustainable development?

VIO: Women’s representation in decision making, particularly in the energy sector, is part of the antidote needed to reverse the deeply embedded inequalities that heighten women’s exclusion from social and economic development.

Under the previous government in Nigeria, women held some of the most powerful cabinet and corporate executive positions in Nigeria across a wide range of areas, including: petroleum, finance, communication technology, stock exchange, aviation and banking. During this period, Nigeria’s gross domestic product (GDP) witnessed unrivalled upward reviews, reaching an all-time high of US $568.51 in 2014. Reports from the national statistical bureau show that Nigeria’s GDP rose to 6.54 per cent in the second quarter of 2014. Having women in governing bodies and decision-making positions not only enhances their economic fortunes and participation in development planning, but also could contribute to the stronger financial performance of national economies and company bottom lines.

Women’s effective leadership in these sectors previously dominated by men has also helped to change the traditional narrative about women’s capabilities from that of caregivers and recipients of small loans to that of competent technocrats and managers of big firms and agencies. A lot more, however, still needs to be done to ensure that rural women participate in, and benefit from, these social and economic gains at the national level.

Affirmative action is an empowering strategy that has been used to expand women’s access to the spaces where social and economic development decisions are made. Countries like Rwanda have adopted quota laws to enhance women’s chances to be elected into political office and/or appointed into decision-making positions. The use of quota-based measures has significantly helped to confront entrenched structural constraints that limit women’s options and inhibit their participation in sustainable development. But we also recognise that we need gender-empowered and -aware men who are more engaged with the traditional roles of women [ie. childcare, cleaning and cooking] and more supportive of women in the workplace.

In the near future, how do you foresee gender equity issues improving?

VIO: Gender equality is a catalyst for sustainable development, and sustainable development can promote gender equality. The findings we are beginning to understand from the ongoing collaborative energy research project between Spaces for Change and IISD show that insensitivity to gender differences in energy policies and programmes reinforce social and economic inequalities, compound fiscal difficulties and tend to place a greater burden on certain groups than others. Therefore, evaluating and documenting the extent to which women participate and benefit from energy sector reforms is key to understanding the links between gaps in gender equality and a lack of energy access. Future interventions at the national and global levels will need to expand their focus on gender constructs, and take measured steps to incorporate gendered perspectives into the conceptual, administrative, management and bureaucratic structures of development.