



Cover photo: Woman in Vietnam making fuel from dried cow dung

## Panel discussion

**Gender Equality and Access to Energy Services  
As part of the EU Sustainable Energy for all Summit**

**16 April, 2012**

**Charlemagne building  
Brussels**

**Organized by the EU Commission, the Danish EU Presidency and  
UN Women**

## Background

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One of the most critical development challenges facing the international community is to overcome “energy poverty” in developing countries: worldwide, approximately 3 billion people rely on biomass for cooking and heating and about 1.5 billion are deprived of access to electricity. People experiencing energy poverty are less likely to earn a living, stay healthy and have time for learning and fulfilment than people who can access adequate and reliable modern energy services. Access to modern energy services is, therefore, increasingly positioned as a precondition for the full enjoyment of basic social and economic rights. At the same time, recognition of the gendered face of energy poverty is growing. Women in most developing countries experience energy poverty differently and more severely than men: unequal gender relations curtail women’s access to energy services and control over benefits, and limit women’s ability to voice their energy concerns and participate in energy related agenda-setting and decision-making.

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) is to take place in Brazil in June 2012. The objectives of Rio+20 are to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assess the progress made and address new and emerging challenges. In 2011, the UN Secretary General launched a global initiative - Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) - and declared 2012 as the International Year for Sustainable Energy for All. One of the main goals of SE4ALL is “ensuring universal access to modern energy services by 2030”.

The EU Sustainable Energy for all Summit is therefore an opportune moment to discuss the relationships between gender, rights and access to energy services. Key recommendations resulting from the panel discussion will be compiled and brought forward to the Women Leaders Forum for Heads of State and Government that will take place in Rio 20 June 2012.

### Aims and objectives of the Conference

The conference aims to contribute to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and access to modern energy services by focusing on gender and energy concerns as a lead up to WLF and Rio+20.

The objectives are to:

- Critically reflect on barriers and enablers to the realization of women’s right to access modern energy services;
- Identify strategic entry-points for gender-aware energy system governance at local, national, regional and international levels to contribute to increased awareness of and improved policy-dialogue on access to modern energy services; and
- Develop key messages on gender equality, women’s rights and access to energy services for national and international policy makers.

## Approach and agenda

The panel discussion will be organized around two main themes: 1) *A gender and rights-based approach to energy access and governance*, and 2) *Barriers and opportunities to the realization of women's right to access energy services*

### **1) A gender and rights-based approach to energy access and governance**

*How can a gender and rights-based approach contribute to national and international development efforts aimed at alleviating energy poverty?*

To assert that access to energy is a right is to make it a legitimate claim insisting that everybody is entitled as rights-holders to access modern energy services. The State as the primary duty bearer has the obligation to realize this right for all its citizens. A gender and rights-based approach to energy access employs an explicit focus on women's energy rights and legitimizes women as rights-holders. It draws attention to rights of women - such as land and property rights - that are suppressed because of unequal gender relations and challenges energy system governance institutions that do not recognize women as rights-holders with entitlements. A gender and rights-based analysis of energy access provides a new outlook on gender aware development interventions and a tool that national government, international development organizations and other actors in the energy system can use to address the multiple gender rights failures that prevail in the energy system.

SE4ALL provides an opportunity to increase the international focus on gender equality and access to energy services substantially. This could include highlighting the potential of an energy governance system that works on the basis of a gender and rights-based approach. The establishment of an international monitoring system—including gender-sensitive targets and indicators on international goals for universal energy access—to assess the progress towards eliminating energy poverty and realizing universal access to energy services would be a critical component to ensure accountability and transparency. Ensuring that gender concerns are explicitly part of such a system could be a strategic entry-point to bring gender substantially into global energy governance. This would require ensuring women's voice, participation, leadership and representation in energy governance systems at all levels.

### **2) Barriers and opportunities to the realization of women's right to access energy services**

*How can national and international development efforts, including the promotion of public-private partnerships and enabling environments, ensure that women's energy rights are realized?*

International and national development efforts have not succeeded in realizing women's energy rights due to the lack of recognition of women's energy needs, knowledge and contribution. These rights failures happen as a result of the underlying cultural, economic and social norms that shape the roles and relations between men and women. Such inequitable gender norms permeate local, national, regional and international energy system

structures and institutions, including their legal and regulatory frameworks, policies and programmes.

In order to redress the gendered nature of energy poverty, energy system governance, policy and programmes need to address structural gender inequalities at the level of institutions. National level energy policy-makers have a number of entry points for gender-aware policy options to do so, including *1) investment in energy infrastructure 2) legal and regulatory reform 3) national budget re-allocation 4) institutional strengthening to support the design of gender-aware management information systems for the energy sector.*

Donors and international development organisations can support the implementation of these policy options that allow for a focus on good governance principles and attention to the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups of people whose energy rights are largely ignored. Other key areas for gender-aware energy programming include providing technical assistance to national energy institutions in setting up accountability systems and governance channels for rights claiming and supporting increased representation of women in formal energy institutions, which in turn can create a positive change of attitude to women at all levels of the energy system.