

The Power to Change: Women and Energy in Central America

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In the rural and peri-urban communities of Central America, women and men live in two different worlds when it comes to energy resources like electricity. Not only is there a marked difference in how they participate in decisions about energy, there's an enormous difference in how - or if - they benefit from those decisions.

For example, women's roles as homemakers make them the chief domestic users of energy, but there is little understanding of what they need to carry out their responsibilities, and little appreciation for the importance of their contributions. When energy prices rise, or shortages occur, essential domestic chores like food preparation must continue, but women have little or no support to deal with these problems. They must somehow find the extra money or seek out alternatives.

In the energy sector – government agencies and private sector organizations that generate, distribute or regulate energy resources – these dynamics are often not taken into account. That is partly because of traditional social attitudes and perceptions, and partly because there are few women in decision-making positions who can represent women's point of view. Women's presence in corporate boardrooms is rare. Although most organizations have non-discriminatory employment policies and are bound by labour standards, in fact women face all sorts of discrimination in the workplace. They are seldom selected for technical training due to entrenched discriminatory attitudes. In the competition for jobs, men are generally favoured over women. For the few who make it to the top, there are no support groups to help them.

While measures to increase the involvement of women in decision-making positions and in non-traditional careers as planners, engineers and technicians are important, these actions do not guarantee that energy policy will be sensitive to gender differences and inequalities. Both women and men need to increase their understanding of gender equality issues in the energy sector.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), is helping the electrical regulatory agencies, planning units and ministries of Central America to change that. The Central America Regional Electricity Project (PREEICA), is implementing a series of initiatives aimed at ensuring an equitable participation of women and men in these institutions as well as ensuring that women in general share in the benefits of their programs.

These activities are being carried out as part of the larger \$25 million 5-year project whose aim is to assist Central American countries in implementing a wide-ranging reform program in the energy sector. This program is expected to lead to improved efficiency, private sector participation, and improved predictability and equity in supply. It will also help these countries to take advantage of the cost savings possible through regional collaboration in electricity. PREEICA is being implemented by a joint venture comprised of SNC-Lavalin International Inc., Acres International Ltd., the Manitoba Hydro-Electric Board and Sigma VI/Universal Management Group, in association with Stikeman Elliott and Ernst & Young.

With the assistance of Canadian and local gender equality experts, PREEICA has carried out an analysis of the situation of women in a number of partner institutions in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras. The challenge in carrying out an institutional diagnosis was to help women to speak frankly about their problems.

The sessions were held in confidence, and a wide-ranging sample of women with different educational levels were consulted. The results of the diagnosis were similar in all three countries: employees had to continually prove themselves to their male colleagues; mistakes were not tolerated; their bosses took credit for their successes and they received no recognition; and access to promotions and training was low. The women often found they were excluded, frequently because of their roles as wives and mothers. They identified the need to have access to technical training to be competitive with male workers.

Sensitization sessions were subsequently held in Honduras and Guatemala. The sessions have taken various forms, from informal meetings to discuss the results of the analysis with men and women decision-makers to two-day workshops on diversity and gender equality in the workforce for senior managers.

The workshops focus on diversity management within the scope of the development of their human resources. Gender equality initiatives are introduced as an essential component of a larger diversity strategy. Participants to the workshops analyze aspects related to diversity and gender equality from their own experiences and are exposed to the experiences of Canadian organizations involved in the generation and distribution of electricity.

These are not just talk shops. They are planned and delivered with the aim of ensuring a commitment from participants to address gender equality issues within their institutions. PREEICA then supports the development of specific actions and provides coaching during their implementation.

For example, in Honduras, PREEICA provided technical advice and support to individuals from senior and intermediate levels for the development of a Gender Equality Policy and Action Plan for the *Secretaría de Recursos Naturales*. The Action Plan, which incorporates organizational and management elements, aims at strengthening the *Secretaría's* capacity to implement the Policy and to train its personnel on gender equality issues to ensure sound development practice. The Policy and Action Plan were developed in consultation with the *Instituto Nacional de la Mujer* (INAM). At a regional level, PREEICA supported the establishment of the *Asociación del Sub-sector Eléctrico de Equidad de Género del Istmo Centroamericano* (ASEGICA)[^]. The objectives of the *Asociación* are, among others, to promote gender equity initiatives within organizations linked to the electrical sector, aimed at advancing women's equal participation with men in the sector.

This year's activities will build on the work done to date and are geared to the publication of a bulletin dealing with gender in the energy sector, sensitization sessions on diversity and gender equality in the workforce for managers, knowledge transfer on employment equity theory and its application and re-training for women who may lose their jobs as a result of the reforms in the sector. The project will also move beyond Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala to provide institutional diagnostics and sensitization programs to other countries in the isthmus. In addition, the Rural Electrification component of PREEICA will incorporate gender equality concerns within the Rural Electrification Policies that are being developed and will provide advice and gender training for the collection and analysis of data.

The team of gender experts responds quickly and flexibly to local requests and priorities, and encourages complementary actions to help ensure that progress will be sustainable. Change however will not happen quickly as their work involves changes in attitudes and practices on the part of individuals and institutions.

Their work is long-term in nature and addresses long-standing inequities that permeate all levels of society. It calls for patience, persistence and interventions that are strategic, integrated and cumulative. But over time, introducing gender equality into planning and program delivery in energy in Central America will result in better family health and more opportunities for women to improve domestic conditions and increase family income.