Women are becoming involved in commercially supplying biomass, breaking into traditional male preserves. These village women in Ghana are selling charcoal at an outdoor market. (Photo: Courtesy of Roger Taylor of DOE/NREL)

This issue of ENERGIA News focuses on the Supply Side of the Energy Chain.

The supply chain encompasses a number of steps, from the exploitation of the resource, through conversion to more useful forms of energy, to the final delivery to the end user. Planning energy supply involves decisions about the form of energy (for example, gas) and the source of this energy (such as natural gas or biogas). These decisions affect the end user; not only in terms of availability and cost of energy as well as the sort of equipment the user has to buy.

On first reflection this is not an area we usually associate with an active involvement of women. However, women are considerably affected by the decisions taken on energy supply, either directly in terms of the fuels they can choose from, or indirectly if they have to bear the environmental consequences of energy resource exploitation. If we examine the supply chain we see that the steps are the same irrespective of the resource, (e.g. coal, gas or wood), and the end-user (industries or households). On realising this, we see that perhaps our first assumption was wrong; indeed women are involved in the supply side of energy since they are primarily the collectors of biomass fuels for households. Readers of ENERGIA News are familiar with the challenges women face daily in supplying their households with energy; the long hours looking for household energy, and the physical toll on women’s bodies from carrying fuel, as well as the dangers they face while out collecting. In this issue there are some interesting articles, which bring to light some new aspects of this familiar situation. Women are involved in more than collecting fuelwood. They are getting involved in formal management systems for sustainable forestry, and they are entering the commercial fields, such as the oil and gas sectors. The supply of energy does not only bring positive benefits. Women have to bear the burden of the negative impacts of developing energy.
resources, such as the loss of traditional rights. What this issue highlights is the need for case studies and research. The findings challenge our conventional ideas about what women do, and help us realise that we need to tailor our support to them in a manner that matches reality and not our perceptions.

Involving Women in Managing Wood Energy Supply

Forests provide both traditional and commercial products, and are the sources of energy fuels on which women are highly dependent. However, forest stocks are facing serious depletion due to over exploitation and land clearance to increase farmland. As a consequence, numerous areas of the world have been suffering from fuelwood shortages and we are all familiar with the impacts that this has had on women’s lives – the many hours they have to walk carrying heavy loads. Over the years, different strategies have been tried to preserve the forests, to ensure some level of sustainable production. Unfortunately, these have not been successful. One of the key factors identified in such unsuccessful conservation has been the lack of participation by stakeholders, particularly the local community, in determining policies and involvement in forest management.

During the 1990s there emerged interesting approaches for how to organise the management of forests involving the community. However, these were not always successful. Why not? Because only half of the community was involved: the male half. Experience has shown that you cannot have sustainable forest management without considering the needs of the women who are the main users of the forests. How do the men feel about this? Do they resist women’s involvement? The article by Suryakutami, which describes a Joint Forest Management approach in India, in which women are involved in the management committees, has some surprising findings. The village men were supportive of women’s involvement; it was men from the other stakeholders groups who were resistant.

Women as Commercial Charcoal Suppliers

Women are also becoming involved in commercially supplying biomass, breaking into traditional male preserves such as charcoal production. In Mali, 60% of charcoal producers are women. Such women have access to a lucrative business, which is important for supporting their families. The article by Sanogo and Skutsch describes a project in Mali that aims to provide the women with a more efficient technology, and so increase their incomes as well as reducing the environmental impacts of tree felling. This project seems to have all the right elements: low cost technology, orientated towards income generation, women are involved in the development of the technology, low cost loans – yet not all women charcoal makers participate. Sanogo and Skutsch give us some insights into the reasons why not. It is a good lesson in not treating women as a homogenous group – even poor rural women.

Women in the Oil and Gas Sector

Although women play an important role in the traditional energy sector, they continue to be under-represented in the conventional energy sectors of oil, gas, coal and electricity. The use of these energy sources considerably impacts on women’s lives and it is important that women are represented in the decision-making processes. Trying to get more women into these sectors requires a change of attitude and cultural practices. Women professionals often feel isolated. ENERGIA News 2 3 carried an article on a project in the Oil and Gas Sector in Pakistan, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which aimed to overcome the challenges women face when entering new job areas. In this issue we read about how CIDA are supporting initiatives to tackle gender issues in the Central American Electricity Sector. The experience gained indicates that gender equality policies require patience, persistence and interventions that are strategic, integrated and cumulative, in order to get the required results. Networking has proved important for the women in the sector, sharing information and experiences on a wide range of issues including dealing with job losses arising from sector reform.

Information: A Strategic Weapon to Aid Women’s Greater Participation in the Energy Supply Side

How can women play a greater role in determining choices about energy supply? Ngoo and Shuma in this issue show that information about energy resources and technology options is a key factor. However, the collection and delivery of the information needed for making choices about energy supply is challenging due to differing education levels, disorganised information, and deficiencies in energy policies. This requires a range of approaches to meet the information requirements of women with varying education levels and in a range of functions. Women professionals need information in alternative forms to women in the community who want to participate in decision-making on energy supply choices. The provision of such information can use very sophisticated technology, as we see in the article by Klunne and Mugishu where satellites can provide information about changes in wood supply, or it can be on the more traditional printed page. As an example, UNIFEM have made a start towards providing women with information about energy with their series of books (see the review in ENERGIA News 3.3). Women need to know where to go to acquire knowledge, resources, skills, as well as efficient technologies. The message is that information empowers women!

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◆ Joy Clancy’s biodata has been published in ENERGIA News 4 1. For her contact details, please refer to page 16.