



ENVIRONMENT  
SPECIAL



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the People of Japan

# GENDERED VOICES

*Climate Change Matters:  
Women engaged in  
Renewable Energy*

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## INTRODUCTION

Energy is not gender neutral.<sup>1</sup> Globally only 22% of the workforce of the energy sector are women, while in Mauritius the figure is as low as 5% for a workforce of 2000 employees (0.4% of total employment).<sup>2</sup> This situation spans the energy sector including production through renewable sources such as solar, wind, hydro, tidal, geothermal and biomass energy. Through insights into the experiences of women engaged in the Renewable Energy (RE) Sector and the fight against climate change, this second edition of UNDP Mauritius Gendered Voices Newsletter explores the multifaceted forms of gendered barriers women face in the energy sector. The edition also highlights the gender needs that must be addressed as part of empowering women and ‘Leaving No One Behind’ in efforts to build a green economy. This includes the implementation of measures such as mainstreaming gender; employing women and tackling gender pay gaps in the energy sector; and devising policies for women’s equitable access to RE sources of energy for their homes and businesses.



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## CLIMATE CHANGE MATTERS: WOMEN ENGAGED IN RENEWABLE ENERGY



## Message from ... Dr Kate O'Shaughnessy, Australian High Commissioner to Mauritius and Seychelles, Ambassador to Madagascar and Comoros



**Date:** 29 March 2021

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I am delighted to contribute to this edition of Gendered Voices, not least because I represent a country leading the world in renewable energy uptake. One in four homes in Australia use solar energy, the highest rate globally. By 2030, 55 percent of our electricity will come from renewables. But we'll need women's involvement to hit that target, a fact recognised by industry programs like

the Australian Clean Energy Council's Women in Renewables initiative.

Renewable energy is part of the solution to climate change, one of the world's most pressing challenges. The World Bank estimates that without a global response to climate change, an additional 100 million people could be living in extreme poverty by 2030.

Women will be amongst those most severely affected, because their livelihoods so often depend on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and the ocean economy.

As a global community, we all have a role to play in reducing carbon emissions. Widespread uptake of technologies like hydrogen, carbon capture and storage, and long duration energy storage can reduce and even eliminate emissions in sectors responsible for 90 percent of the world's emissions.

### And women are a vital part of this picture.

In confronting a task of this scale, we simply cannot afford to deploy just half of our human capital. We need women engaged in every element of the renewable energy supply chain, from research and development, to installation and maintenance.

As the case studies in this edition illustrate, women bring technical know-how, creativity, and drive to the renewable energy challenge.

I'm especially pleased to note the priority the UNDP and the Mauritian Government are giving to transitioning Mauritius to a low carbon economy, and to ensuring that women are at the heart of this transition. Australia looks forward to partnering with you in this important work.

### Dr Kate O'Shaughnessy

*Australian High Commissioner to Mauritius and Seychelles, Ambassador to Madagascar and Comoros*

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# EMPOWERING WOMEN IN EFFORTS TO BUILD A GREEN ECONOMY

**H**istorically women have been invisible in the energy sector.<sup>3</sup> However, since the role of women in energy and renewable energy has emerged as an area of research in the 1980s<sup>4</sup>, the gender gaps existing in this field of activity worldwide have been exposed. Amongst the longstanding gender issues which have been pointed out are cultural norms and stereotypes that portray women as less well-versed in technology and incapable of “building, operating and maintaining sophisticated technologies”,<sup>5</sup> and the under-representation of women in green jobs and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). In Mauritius, only 2.1% of women studied engineering at tertiary level in 2018 compared to 9.7% of men<sup>6</sup>.

Fortunately, there are signs that the situation may improve in the near future. Internationally, the Renewable Energy sector has been extending its goals to create a more gender-inclusive workplace culture. As a matter of fact, its workforce consists of 32% of women against 22% of women in the non-renewable energy sector.<sup>7</sup> In Mauritius, the number of green jobs in local energy sector is estimated at 448.<sup>8</sup> (ILO, 2014) In 2010-11, overall green jobs in Mauritius represented 6.3% of total employment.<sup>9</sup>

Another pervasive gender issue playing against women in the energy sector is the global calamity of female poverty and the subsequent feminization of energy poverty<sup>10</sup>. Mauritius is no exception, with 11% of women living below the poverty line compared to 9.6% of men<sup>11</sup>. According to Forbes, energy poverty affects 2 billion women worldwide. In contrast, research empirically shows that more electricity empowers women. For example, energy access can increase female literacy through the

availability of lighting, radio and television, which help increase women’s access to information and their ability to study.<sup>12</sup> In this light, women across the world need energy, especially RE, not only to meet their basic household needs, but increasingly to sustain their livelihoods, energy security, economic empowerment and life opportunities. In a bid to empower women in RE and economically, the UNDP is supporting a Green Climate Fund (GCF) project entitled “Accelerating the transformational shift to a low-carbon economy in the Republic of Mauritius”, which provides basic training on solar PV installation for female entrepreneurs who can then potentially integrate RE in their business activities.

To date, 21% of RE feed into the national grid of Mauritius. The latest national RE strategy aims to increase this percentage to 35% by 2025 and 40% by 2030 as part of the Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement and to reduce the island’s CO2 emission and dependence upon imported fossil fuel (87.4%)<sup>13</sup>. To assist the Government of Mauritius in meeting its RE targets, the UNDP is providing substantial support through the GCF, with a grant of USD 28 million, together with over USD 162 millions of co-financing by stakeholders and Government counterparts. The grant will contribute to (i) review and update national policies for RE; (ii) procure and install cutting-edge technologies that enhance the national grid’s absorption capacity of RE sources; and (iii) deploy 25MW of rooftop PV systems, especially for low-income households and financially-struggling women-headed households.<sup>14</sup> Other local schemes underpinning the transition from brown to green energy, include the Home Solar Project launched by the Central Electricity Board (CEB) and CEB Green Ltd, which aims to install solar PV systems on 10,000 low-income household-rooftops by 2024.



## PURSuing HER CAREER IN RENEWABLE ENERGY: KAJAL'S GOALS

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**32**-year-old Kajal has a BSc in Science and two MSc degrees - one in Engineering and the other in Renewable Energy; plus a PhD in Biochemistry, including Biomass. She is one of the few women in Mauritius to pursue a career in Engineering, Technology and Energy, a male-dominated field. Married and mother of two babies, she shares her experience as an ambitious young woman breaking gendered barriers to keep contributing to the 2030 renewable energy targets of Mauritius.

“Prior to joining MARENA, the negative reactions I faced as a woman, professional and mother were striking! After giving birth, colleagues

*maintained that I would lose focus on my research work and for any error arising in my work, they would seek to confirm their apprehensions. Joining MARENA was a cornerstone in my career-path. However, stepping into the energy sector, my field of expertise, entailed other gendered barriers. Notwithstanding my qualifications and proficiency in energy technologies, I would be kept away from technical aspects of the sector by male collaborators; the general perception being that I would be technologically inept and incompetent due to my gender. In meetings, often being the only woman present, I had some difficulties being heard while giving my inputs on technical issues. These gendered impediments can lead to discouragement, but I am a determined person; fully committed and passionate about my work!*

*At MARENA the work is versatile! The learning process is continuous as Renewable Energy is an ever-evolving field! My tasks vary from drafting, implementing and evaluating schemes on emerging innovative green energy technologies and regulations; leading awareness campaigns supported by the UNDP on the interface between green energy and Climate Change; carrying out committee reviews; devising funding strategies; compiling data on green jobs and RE for Mauritius; and participating in Advisory meetings on energy-related policy issues. I also pursue latest courses and trainings available on green energy to keep my knowledge and skills up to date.*

*One of the achievements I am most proud of is having discovered the reason behind the sharp drop in Mauritius' ranking on the Global Innovation Index, that derived from a legal misunderstanding. After figuring it out, I contacted the focal point of World Bank to report. Thankfully, Mauritius' legitimately impressive ranking was restored in the following year's GII report!*



Kajal explained that there are various types of RE sources which Mauritius can exploit, including solar, water, wind, and biomass energy. However, since sugarcane plantation is waning, the production of energy from bagasse will inevitably decrease, and it is thus important to look for new solutions.

“ At MARENA, we are working hard towards finding prospective RE sources, state of the art technologies and processes that can help to expand the current local green energy production capacity. One of our forthcoming projects is floating solar PV, which is still at the conception phase.

I am persuaded that the national targets of reaching 35% of RE in 2025 and 40% in 2030 are attainable, and women have a key role to play in this endeavor. Women, especially in female-headed households, seem to understand and embrace the initiative of installing rooftop solar PV. The response to our training sessions tailored for women entrepreneurs on the basics

of photovoltaic, has thus far been positive. Beneficiaries even get the chance to learn to manually repair and fix the PV, which boosts their interest in technology and elevates their experience with RE.

Even if many are doubtful about the efficiency of Renewable Energy, Kajal reassures that PV technologies are evolving and that in the long-term solar energy accounts to less CO<sub>2</sub> emissions overall than fossil fuel. Moreover, in the last decade the price of solar PV panels has also dropped by approximately 80%, making them more affordable.

“ I urge people not to underestimate Climate Change impacts and the instrumental role that RE plays in cutting CO<sub>2</sub> emission. People should be more energy-conscious in general and harness renewable energy - and I fully encourage women to commit to and embrace this endeavor.”

## SIDS AS WORLD LEADERS IN RENEWABLE ENERGY: FIONA'S OPTIMISM



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**31**-year-old Fiona is the Senior Program Manager of the Clinton Climate Initiative's Islands Energy Program, a job that entails propelling RE technologies in global island communities. Her studies in Political Economy and her prior experience in renewable energies help her to grasp the key economic factors that influence governments to take economic policy decisions regarding RE, alongside ecological imperatives.

“There is an assumption that one needs to have a technical background to step into the energy sector. But this sector, like any others, requires and depends upon a range of talents, expertise, knowledge, and skills to evolve and progress. Diversity in the workplace, encompassing gender, age, race, and educational background, fosters this value creation. I have worked with influential women, with very diverse educational and professional

backgrounds, who have made major contributions to the Renewable Energy field.

Founded in 2016, our WiRE (Women in RE) network at the Clinton Foundation comprises highly qualified and competent women energy professionals, including engineers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and lawyers, amongst others. It is a platform linking them to share experiences, know-how and skills. They often share their experiences of unconscious gender bias, gender discrimination and glass-ceiling barriers across the energy sector. To address the widespread issue of women's invisibility in the energy sector, we compile a database of female speakers who are ready to be deployed as panelists and speakers in energy forums, conferences, roundtables, etc. The point is that these women are pivotal role models with whom other women and girls can associate to subsequently join the energy industry, or pursue a career in STEM fields.

Through the Islands Energy Program founded in 2012, we have a strong focus on solar projects. All the islands with whom we collaborate benefit from a cost-free natural resource - the sun. Currently, I am supporting the pioneering floating solar project in the Seychelles, a technology that Mauritius is also likely to adopt. I am proud to be part of this project, which will be a steppingstone to the evolution of solar technologies, especially for islands around the world that usually face land shortage problems. Islands are proving to be phenomenal leaders in the RE revolution!”

Fiona strongly believes that the global transition towards RE is slowly but surely heading in the right direction. With innovative technologies, stronger storage systems, national support of utility-scale projects and genuine sustainable activities occurring in the sector, the fight against Climate Change is being addressed more efficiently.

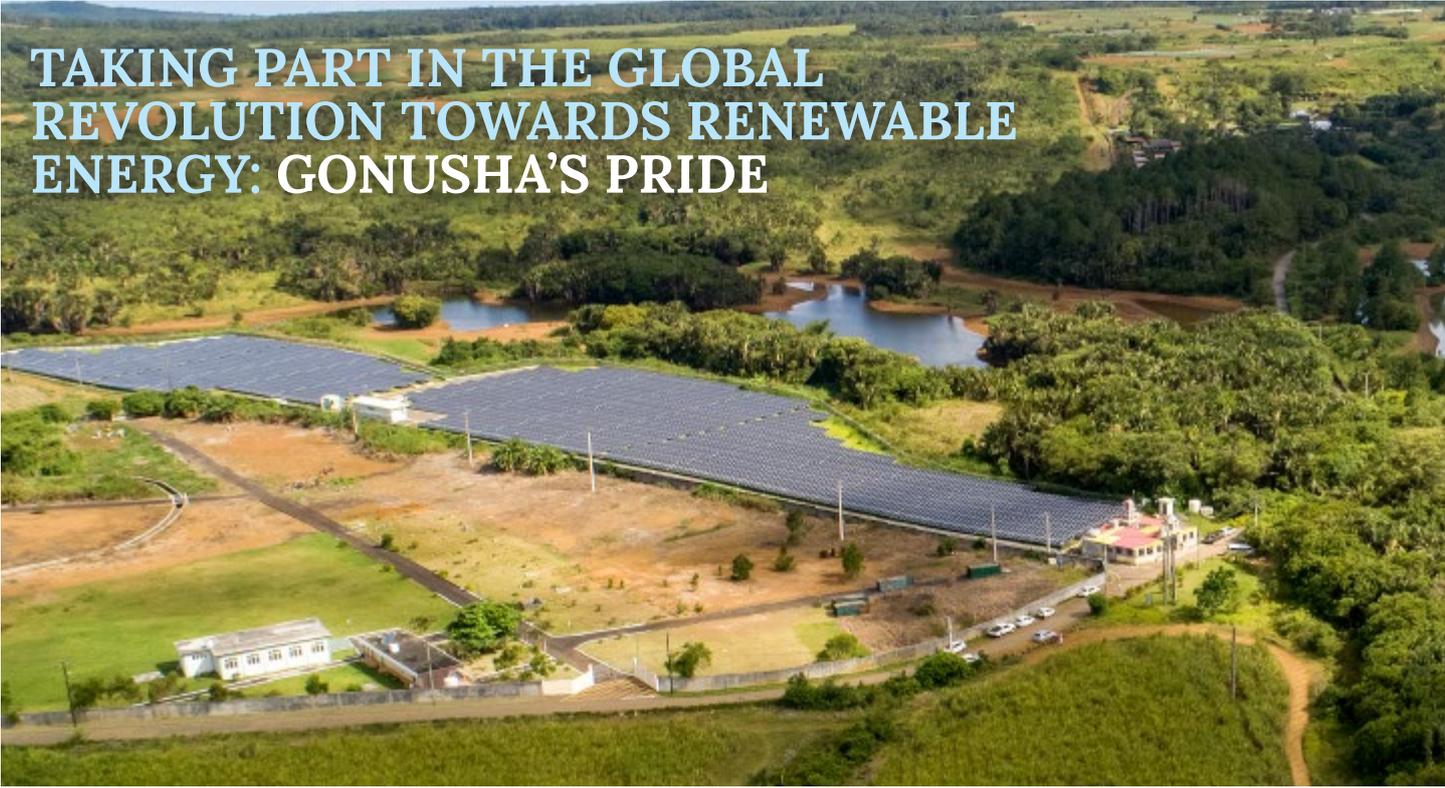


“ In Mauritius, we continue to collaborate with various stakeholders on governmental projects. The solar entrepreneurship training that benefitted approximately 80 women last year is an example of the laudable initiatives that brought multiple stakeholders together, including the Ministry of Energy and Public Utilities and MARENA, UNDP, MITD and CEB. We contributed advisory services to include analysis of ownership options for rooftop solar projects, specifically looking at NGOs, public buildings, and low and middle-income households, with an emphasis on women-headed households. It is truly vital to mainstream gender in energy, including both women’s inclusion in the energy workforce and women’s access to energy. Green energy, specifically, underpins and improves women’s livelihoods and economic opportunities.”

According to Fiona, the youth of today are more aware and concerned about Climate Change issues than the preceding generations. Disseminating scientific knowledge and facts on the global climate crisis and the benefits of RE via media platforms creates powerful movements and more worldwide endorsement of RE.

“ I think that we need to exert our responsibility at both personal and community levels when taking fundamental steps towards tackling Climate Change. Individual responsibility and collective action are key when advocating for the inclusion of sustainable energy in the fight against Climate Change.”

## TAKING PART IN THE GLOBAL REVOLUTION TOWARDS RENEWABLE ENERGY: GONUSHA'S PRIDE



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**34**-year-old Gonusha is among one of the few women in the Central Electricity Board (CEB) working as an engineer in the field of Renewable Energy. Driven by her passion for STEM subjects at school level, she undertook engineering studies at university and thereafter a career in the energy sector, spanning broad aspects of energy to renewable alternatives. She describes her growing interest and faith in Renewable Energy, which she considers as a major solution to fighting Climate Change and saving the planet.

“ I recently joined CEB as an Engineer in RE. It was a natural transition from my previous job in building services, where my tasks included designing building requirements in terms of services, analyzing the energy efficiency of buildings, finding strategic ways to mitigate overconsumption of energy and implementing energy saving measures aligned with progressive governmental policies on energy consumption.

The energy sector is inherently challenging and obviously more so for women. Throughout the years, I have had to overcome multiple obstacles due to my gender in this historically male-dominated sector. Women engineers tend to be more integrated and accepted once their competence is proven and acknowledged by colleagues – an attitude which is not expressed towards male workers. Today, I lead a team of senior technical officers and technicians. I do not really experience



*gendered barriers in my internal work sphere, though external stakeholders, at times, show concerns and bias because I am a woman."*

Gonusha occasionally leads awareness campaigns on RE to educate people about the importance of shifting from fossil fuel to zero CO<sub>2</sub>-emitter sources of energy.

**“** *It is quite challenging to translate technical terminologies into simple words for the public. However, I put a lot of effort in explaining to participants about the close link between clean energy and the fight against Climate Change. It is important that people assimilate the ‘bigger picture’. Concurrently, I keep informing all our energy technicians about the importance of their work to the broader common goal!*

*As a woman working in the RE sector, I am proud of my contribution to the implementation of RE projects for the*

*country. COVID-19 has unfortunately caused major disruptions in our time plans, but we are doing everything possible to provide a better service. The pandemic has also exposed the risks of being dependent upon fossil fuel; and of facing a shortage due to stringent lockdowns. This has fueled our own determination to continue pursuing RE alternatives. By doing so, we also mitigate risks linked to fossil fuel transportation at sea such as oil spills, and other issues linked to foreign exchange fluctuations and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.*

According to Gonusha, it is important to strategically target women to support Renewable Energy in the energy mix.

**In many households, despite traditional gender stereotypes and roles, women have decision-making power and influence over household bills and other expenditures. In this respect, women are the backbone of sustainable energy democracy at grassroots household level.**

Their consideration towards their family’s and community’s welfare has made them conscious of the advantages of clean energy for the future generations.

**“** *Women have an important and meaningful role to play in the energy sector. We must imperatively encourage more girls to pursue careers in STEM and green sectors/jobs like RE. It is indeed important to bridge longstanding gender gaps, but we must also ensure that women are present and active in industries of the future, like renewables."*



## SELLING 'ECO-FRIENDLY' ROTI AND JUICE, FOR SHARMEELA

**42**-year-old Sharmeela feels lucky that her household has been selected for the implementation of the Home Solar project launched by CEB Green Energy Co. Ltd in 2018. Meant to endow 10,000 low-income households with cost-free rooftop solar PV kits, this award-winning project also offers 50 kWh of free electricity monthly for a period of 20 years to its beneficiaries. With such advantages, Sharmeela, who sells 'rotis' and juice in her small snack in Goodlands, has seen quick improvements in her livelihood.

**“** I used to work as a maid and my husband is a lorry driver. Two years ago, I decided to open a small snack shop in the premises of my home to sell 'rotis' (Mauritian pancakes) and juice. The electricity bills would often reach an exorbitant Rs 1200 per month for the few electrical appliances that we use. Besides the lighting system, I have two fridges - one for the house and one for the snacks, a washing machine, and an electrical internet system.

*From our meagre total household income, we used to struggle to pay the monthly bills! However, the installation of the solar PV system on my roof was a turning point as only one month after the installation process, my electricity bill dropped by almost 50%!”*

*At first, I was concerned about the feasibility of installing solar PV on my iron-sheet roof. However, I was reassured that my roof was not an obstacle to fix PV panels. I was amazed at how smoothly the procedures unfolded from the moment that we were told that we were amongst the selectees. Recently, the officers of the CEB even came to check the PVs' condition to see if maintenance was required. Today, not only my home, but also my snack shop is powered by RE. As a woman entrepreneur, I am proud to operate a small business that sources clean energy from an advanced technology that saves me money every month. It is economically empowering!”*

Sharmeela wishes to encourage more women to embrace rooftop solar PV for their home or business, to tap into the economic benefits of RE energy consumption. She also wishes to raise fundamental awareness on the salient ecological aspects and benefits of RE, which will ultimately reduce their carbon footprint.

**“** I really hope that households, especially women-headed households and women entrepreneurs, will invest in solar PV systems and pave the way for a greener economy, healthier environment and hopeful future. Despite the sharp fall in PV's price over the years, affording solar energy may still be beyond poor people's reach. Interested women can receive some form of financial aid like governmental subsidies and/or targeted PV solar loan benefits for vulnerable women (like single mothers) and women entrepreneurs.

## FINDINGS

According to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the number of jobs in renewables could rise from 10.3 million in 2017 to almost 29 million by 2050.<sup>15</sup> However, RE is non-gender neutral and currently employs only 32% of women worldwide. Moreover, there is emerging evidence of pre-existing gendered barriers that pervade the historically male-dominated energy sector, encapsulating renewables, even in the Mauritian context.

Drawing upon the lived experiences of the female informants in this newsletter, specific challenges faced by women in energy and RE are illustrated. To date, ingrained gender norms and stereotypes depicting women as generally uninterested and inept in energy, prevail in sociocultural and socioeconomic systems. Also, qualified and competent women professionals in energy and STEM fields are not spared of conscious and unconscious gender biases against their proficiency.

These gender biases, which hinder women's advancement in the energy sector, are also likely to discourage the female workforce from stepping into or remaining in STEM fields or complex/innovative projects<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, such barriers to the integration of women are likely to impede the energy sector itself. Due to a lack of diversity, the sector is prone to be undermined by limited talents, glass ceiling hindrances and unaddressed gender pay gaps. Women's presence in the energy sector is, thus, important to motivate future generations of women to join in, and to create an energy work environment that fosters diversity, inclusivity and equity.

Tackling the feminization of energy poverty and promoting the integration of women in the energy sector as empowered economic agents, requires strategic gender responses to women's specific needs. This is a challenge to address both at policy level and within the energy work system.







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