

A woman wearing a grey and black patterned saree is focused on writing in a notebook. She is holding a pen in her right hand. The room around her is filled with numerous yellow solar lamps, some of which are lit, creating a warm glow. The lamps are arranged on shelves and tables, suggesting a laboratory or a workshop setting. The background shows more lamps and some electrical equipment.

**Gender and Energy Research:**  
Building the evidence base for improving  
energy interventions' effectiveness

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# ENERGIA **NEWS**

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Uwarugondo village's VLE, Donatille Yankurije, explaining the recharging process to village member. (Photo: Francesco Ficcarelli/IPA)

## Promoting female entrepreneurship in the Rwandan energy sector

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Gender discrimination is present all over the world, and cuts across multiple dimensions. A dimension that is rarely explored, but has important consequences for women's empowerment, is gender discrimination in entrepreneurship. Women are excluded from profitable businesses due to a mix of cultural and social norms. They are less likely than males to run a business and, when they do, they operate on a smaller scale and in traditional, informal sectors that are often linked to household skills such as cooking and sewing. As a result, female-led businesses are less profitable than male-led businesses. Lower returns on economic activity results in a lower accumulation of education and business skills, thereby creating a vicious circle.

A growing body of research from Africa, East Asia and Latin America shows that female role models can be instrumental in breaking this cycle and changing aspirations among young girls, and among parents about their children's future. These role models can be from the political arena, like village councillors, or from the private sector, such as entrepreneurs. For example, exposure to educated professionals has been shown to improve parents' educational aspirations for their children, and to a greater extent for daughters than for sons (Chiapa et al., 2012). Another study, in Nigeria, found that female entrepreneurs working in male-dominated sectors were much more profitable than other female entrepreneurs. That study found that entry into male-dominated sectors was eased by the presence of a role model and access to information, with no differences in

skills, education or other socioeconomic characteristics compared to male entrepreneurs.

In this regard, our project, which falls within ENERGIA's Research Area 5: the role of the private sector in scaling up energy access, is designed to answer four questions:

1. What are the differences between male, female and mixed Village Level Enterprises in terms of their business operation?
2. How do elements of the business model employed influence adoption and use of rechargeable lights? Our study will systematically compare different pricing options and promotion strategies, with the gender composition of the enterprises a key variable.
3. What effect does having female micro-entrepreneurs as role models have on aspirations – particularly those of young girls?
4. What are the effects for males and females of improved household lighting?

The research strategy combines qualitative and quantitative methods. A scoping study based on qualitative research has provided input for the design of the action-research component of the study. This scoping study mainly consisted of interviews with key stakeholders including the implementing partner, its current clients, local experts in the field of gender and

energy, and organisations with similar programmes to ours. The action-research component will be implemented as a randomised controlled trial (RCT) and is currently being piloted in rural Rwanda prior to the full-scale study. Lighting kits will be allocated among villages, and groups of Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) will be recruited to operate solar-powered charging stations in each study village.

The project's main contribution is the implementation of a large-scale experimental study producing high-quality data that will allow comparison of the performance of VLE groups by their gender composition: all-male, all-female and mixed groups. This approach is novel, since most of the existing evidence on gender and entrepreneurship comes from case studies which, although insightful, use very small samples and are difficult to generalise.

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*"Women are better leaders than men amongst the VLE groups. ...Women are always at home while men go off doing different activities. ...So women are always available whenever clients come and since women do not like to go far from their homes they are better in leadership positions."*

*Marcella Uwizeyimana (female VLE, Mavumba villages)*

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### Key findings from the scoping phase:

The research team has had the opportunity to visit field sites several times, including to currently active VLEs. These visits have provided interesting insights into gender dynamics and the appetite amongst women to participate as VLEs. They also enabled us to identify three potential threats to the study – as well as mechanisms to ameliorate their effects.

First, social or cultural barriers could prevent women from becoming VLEs. For instance, despite their excitement during village and sector-level presentations on forming microenterprises, men with senior roles in the village tend to end up running such enterprises. To circumvent this problem, in the presentations in the pilot villages, the recruitment of female VLEs was explicitly sought. As a result, gender randomisation has been successful in nine pilot villages.

Second, there is the concern that, due to a historical process of discrimination in many dimensions, women may lack the skills to run a business; or rather they may feel they lack the skills. Here, statistical analysis of our



## Key messages

Women are interested in becoming Village Level Entrepreneurs but social, cultural and historical aspects can hinder their actual participation. Measures to address these aspects should be embedded in energy projects from their inception.

implementing partner's administrative data shows that female entrepreneurs perform at least as well as their male counterparts.

Third, several studies and our qualitative research highlight the importance of not alienating entrepreneurs' husbands and children. Husbands were invited to attend the meetings so they could clearly understand the intervention's requirements as well as its expected benefits. This was done to avoid husbands seeing the intervention as competing for their wife's time and attention, and even for the household's economic resources, perceptions that could lead them to actively oppose the intervention. The husbands' role in supporting their wives and the fact that their wives, and not them, would be the VLEs was highlighted. Evidence that the husbands view the intervention positively is seen in the fact that collecting the commitment fee, of approximately US\$13 per VLE, has not been a problem in our pilot villages.

As part of the scoping phase, we reached out to local researchers to listen to their experiences with gendered programming in Rwanda. We talked with Edward Katwaza, a gender economist with the Centre for Gender Studies, College of Arts and Social Science, University of Rwanda. Edward holds a Master of Arts in Gender Analysis and Economics from Makerere University and a Bachelor's Degree in Economics from the University of Rwanda.

### 1. In your view, what is the general attitude of policymakers in Rwanda towards gender research that puts women at the forefront of programme interventions?

Having dealt directly with policymakers in Rwanda, I can tell you that, at the policy level, there is a will to make programmes gender-aware – to mainstream gender at all levels. For instance, Rwanda is a signatory of CEDAW, the Beijing platforms and other UN conventions.

The will is there, but there are also problems. The general attitude is that gender needs to be a cross-cutting issue, but there are two main problems.

First, despite this willingness, we don't really know how to mainstream gender; and, second, gender is only seen as a women's issue, and men are excluded. It is important that policies and programmes relate to both males and females. In addition, at times, the concept of gender is just thrown into a programme. It is added at the last minute, but it needs to be incorporated right from a programme's inception.

Finally, there is also a gap between the intention and the implementation, so we need to engage policymakers in training sessions.

## 2. What types of social barriers do you think women in local communities face when starting a business?

Cultural perceptions make men feel superior to women. As a consequence of these perceptions, other barriers emerge. For instance, women are not trained to start businesses, and this affects female agency – their ability to take initiatives. Women seem reluctant to take the initiative or to take the risk of starting a business and, as I said, this mainly stems from cultural and traditional barriers.

There are constraints on women's mobility, but there is also their overwhelming engagement in unpaid tasks: childcare, community care, family engagements, weddings and holiday events, and taking care of all these tasks doesn't leave women time to engage in business.

Cultural barriers generate economic barriers as well. Until recently, women in Rwanda could not inherit, so they lack assets. Laws to change this are now in place but they are not yet fully applied.

## 3. In this study, we will specifically select women to lead female microenterprise groups. As the energy sector is stereotypically considered a male industry, in what ways do you see this project as an opportunity to change perceptions about gender participation in various industries?

If women are trained, your study will show that they can do the work as well as men. If women can manage in that sector, they can become role models and show to other women that there are opportunities to manage in other sectors as well.

It is vital that the business training stresses the issue of gender dynamics within the household, aiming to change the perception that women cannot be entrepreneurs. A common mistake in women's empowerment programmes is advocating for women at the expense of men, and not dealing with gender relations: it is absolutely essential to teach gender relations as part of empowerment training! Not only the woman, but also her husband and children, need the training.

## 4. What do you think the main impact of having female microenterprises will be on youth in the households and communities of the female microentrepreneurs?

I think having female micro-entrepreneurs as role models will ease the social constraints and preconceived biases against females. Children will look at these female entrepreneurs and see opportunities they can aspire to. They will see things can change.

### ...and on the female entrepreneurs themselves?

They will realise that, within themselves, they have the skills necessary to succeed in business.

## Research Area 5 The role of the private sector in scaling up energy access

### Keywords

gender empowerment; female entrepreneurs; clean energy; Rwanda

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