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Integrating gender equality and climate resilience into private sector policies and initiatives – a transport sector case study discussion

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Integrating gender equality and climate resilience into private sector policies and initiatives – a transport sector case study discussion, Megapower Ltd. Barbados

“The introduction of electric mobility to public transport in Barbados has been a long sought and long fought for initiative. The Government of Barbados made a decision to introduce electric buses into public transport and in doing that they not only improved accessibility for a significant portion of our travelling public, in the form of persons with mobility challenges, but for the rest of us who do not have mobility challenges that you see immediately. It also helped because we had challenges with persons being unable to step into the buses. With these new buses we have introduced kneeling technology, which means that the floor is a lot closer, and we have brought in other features such as air conditioning. We have also introduced WIFI and USB charging points.

In the industry, we are seeing a number of females in the public transport sector including myself as the second in command at the Transport Board. We have a number of females who are owners of public transport, and we are seeing this in our Transport Augmentation Programme (TAP)”. 2020 and 2021 have been some challenging years but we have also seen some improvements in the role of female participation in the world of transportation”.

- Mrs. Lynda Holder, Chief Operations Officer, Barbados Transport Board

In order to progress gender equality in the sector of climate resilience, what is needed is fewer discussions amongst like-minded individuals, more public awareness and ultimately implementation. As we head towards COP 26 – the visibility efforts, especially for small island states, at the frontline of climate impact, should focus around showcasing what has worked well and what can be replicated and improved upon at this time-critical juncture. We may be too small to have a significant impact on reversing climate change on a grand global scale, but we can show, by example, that change is necessary and possible, even with limited resources. In this note, I share some of the experiences in Barbados, specifically in the transport and renewable energy sectors. I also explore, how the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), points 5 (gender equality) and 13 (climate action) can come together, for private sector policy decisions.

E-Mobility in Barbados: Electric cars

Megapower Ltd., a private sector company, registered in Barbados has been operating a specialist electric vehicle garage since 2013. The company focuses on promoting the uptake of electric vehicles powered by renewable sources. This has included rolling out a network across Barbados of publicly accessible charging points, currently at 35 locations and growing. Many decisions have gone into the public charging network, with convenience and accessibility being the primary considerations – the consideration specific to female accessibility has included lighting and security. All of Megapower’s charging points are in well-lit carparks as close as possible to the entrance of buildings, shopping centres, restaurants, hotels etc. Involving female customers in the decision of where to put charging points has been important in the roll out of this network. By having a gender policy that looks at every revenue stream in the business, private sector companies can place the gender lens in decision making and have an inclusive focus on women. However, this isn’t necessarily the priority of private sector – and often benefits of female participation are not understood across the majority male-led businesses in Barbados and the Caribbean.

Accessibility and affordability are especially important in the area of climate change – as often upfront costs for energy conservation or alternatives to fossil fuels become prohibitive, creating nice-to-have, but not essential, products or services for both men and women. With the Caribbean region having a prevalence of single, female-led households (approximately 50%), other necessities take prevalence. Yet, because they are leading households, women have a major role to play in sustainable household practices. Electric vehicles are an expensive example, but even lower cost, energy efficient investments, such as swapping to LED lights, which would save women money in the longer term, are still unlikely to be a priority over feeding the household, regular bills, childcare, expenses around the threat of hurricanes and compounded financial pressures from the ongoing COVID pandemic.

Of the last 100 electric vehicles sold by Megapower Ltd., 29% were to women or women-owned businesses. For a customer previously spending US\$300 per month in gas or diesel, they are now able to spend just US\$100 on electricity covering the same distance. Electric vehicles are the only vehicles that can support the grid and promote refuelling from renewable energy (solar). Megapower is the newest member of the Barbados Car Dealers Association. Data is shared on types of vehicle and monthly sales amongst members, but this is not broken down by gender or types of financing. This data could contribute to policy making and inform business decisions.

Back in 2013, there were very few finance companies and insurance companies in Barbados willing to finance and insure electric vehicles. The interest rate for financing electric vehicles has dropped from 8% in 2013 to as low as 3.5% in 2021, inline with internal combustion engine vehicles. Public awareness, education and product familiarisation has been a large part of this. Megapower has been working with General Accident Insurance Company on an electric vehicle specific insurance policy – this is something that has been suggested over the years to other insurance companies but there was no progress. To date local insurers have used standard comprehensive motor wordings to cover electric vehicles and because of this, the policies are silent on whether risks associated with certain component parts, such as charging infrastructure, that may operate separate from the vehicle are covered. This could lead to ambiguity in the event of an accidental damage claim. The wording that General Accident is recommending is, “the standard policy wording, excluding any reference to component parts found in ICE vehicles that are not in electric vehicles and the addition of these coverages for reduction of ambiguity and to provide electric vehicle owners with the sense of having fit-for-purpose, electric vehicle friendly cover that supports their environmentally conscious choice.” Notably, the General Accident office, started operation in Barbados in May 2020 and is predominantly female run.

Our next step working with General Accident Insurance and other insurance companies will be to encourage insurance policies aimed at women switching to electric vehicles. Here is where data is critical and sector support beyond individual company initiatives is needed. Looking at rates and types of accidents specifically amongst female electric vehicle owners/drivers may help. Also building a case for initial access to finance for women interested in buying electric vehicles, either through loans, leases or bundles, such as creating climate resilience financing for women grouping electric vehicles, photo-voltaic systems and energy efficient products.

E-Mobility in Barbados – Electric Buses

In 2020, the Government of Barbados introduced electric buses into its Transport Board fleet. This has been a complete process of modernising the bus fleet and for the first time there is disability access as a standard feature, allowing both wheelchairs but also users of strollers, and mother and child seating. This is the largest public electric bus fleet in the Caribbean at 49 electric buses and expected to grow to 59 in the next 6 months. These 59 electric buses will represent more than half of the buses owned by the Barbados Transport Board. It is an excellent example of how gender and climate change initiatives collide for mutual benefit. Zero emission driving in public transportation has been a big

step, but there is still a lot that can be done for women especially. Barbados' very traditional into-city and out-of-city route system is less relevant today with many business centres located in-land. Looking at route optimisation and having inclusive discussions with women that consider bus stop locations, safety and shelter for women and children would help. The electric buses are equipped with data monitoring systems for the first time and this will include monitoring driver behaviour, charging cycles and vehicle emission and foreign exchange savings (through not importing fossil fuel).

Data and evidence are essential to decision and policy making. For example, a 2020 study done by MDPI showed that in South Korea gender has an important role in explaining the personal attitudes, preferences, and behaviours of passengers on public transport. They compared how differently two groups (297 male and 289 female) evaluated the importance of the major attributes of electrified buses. It found that women valued the safety and environmental friendliness as more critical than did men. On the other hand, men gave higher value to ride comfort and exterior design attributes. In other areas, however, such as cleanliness and crowding, there were only small differences between gender groups.

It is well documented that climate change has a disproportionate impact amongst women and girls. Its impact can increase women's workloads and limit access to resources, decision-making, mobility, healthcare infrastructure and rights. In the private sector, we can integrate gender equality into our business. We can create effective partnerships, with public sector and academia to work on gender and climate change decision-making and initiatives. We can work on gender mainstreaming into climate change efforts, and into climate financing, technology development, mitigation, etc.

Reassuringly in Barbados, there is strong female leadership from the top, having a female Prime Minister, and in her words at the 76th session of the U.N. General Assembly at United Nations Headquarters, "who will stand up for the small island development states who need 1.5degrees to survive as we go to COP 26". Here is where best practices, data sharing and more public awareness is needed.

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