June 13, 2017 – A workshop bringing together more than 100 women energy entrepreneurs, including experts in energy - policy, financing, and capacity building, opened today in Libreville, Gabon. The Women’s Entrepreneurs and Sustainable Energy Workshop brings to light the role that women can play across the energy value chain to expand economic opportunities and alleviate energy poverty. UN Environment, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Iceland, United Nations University Gender Equality and Studies Programme (UNU-GEST), UN Women, and Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA), joined forces in organizing the event alongside the Sixteenth Session of the African Ministerial Conference on Environment (AMCEN 16).

Opened by Ms. Juliette Biao Koudenoukpo - UN Environment Director and Regional Representative for Africa, it aims at identifying the main challenges that hinder establishment, growth, and development of women entrepreneurs - micro, to medium sized - serving the different market segments including the “last mile” energy market. Further, it also aims at bringing gender equality concerns to be included in the action agenda on gender and sustainable energy as well as propose innovative policy instruments, financing and business models, and technological aspects, that will address the challenges identified.

During her opening speech, Juliette reiterated that Clean, reliable energy is a critical element of development for Africa, the SDG’s and the 2063 goals and that Africa’s energy supplies were not meeting the energy needs of the continent.

“Ms. Juliette Biao Koudenoukpo - UN Environment Director and Regional Representative for Africa, Ms. Haddijatou Jallow - Chair of the Africa Women Ministers and Leaders Environment, John Bideri - Co-chair of the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, and Hildigunnur Engilbertsdottir - Ministry of Foreign affairs - Icelandic International Development Agency during the opening session of the workshop.

“We need to transform our women from traditional to technology based use of clean renewable energy and from user to Agents of Change and from consumer to Producer.”

- Ms. Juliette Biao Koudenoukpo
Other speakers during the opening session were Ms. Haddijatou Jallow - Chair of the Africa Women Ministers and Leaders Environment, John Bideri - Co-chair of the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, and Hildigunnur Engilbertsdottir - Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Icelandic International Development Agency.

In her remarks Ms. Jallow pointed out that Women need to be included at all level of decision making to make this happen at community, local, national and global level. Policies need to be gender sensitive. Actions to address gender equality concerns that can be incorporated in the AMCEN outcome document and the potential forthcoming gender-energy programme by the Africa Office. She also reiterated that the workshop is a good platform for promoting the achievement of SDG Goal 5 and 7, and the AU Agenda 2063.

"We must be ready to take bold decisions that will result in ambitious proposals, and the decisions we take are critical for women empowerment and their wellbeing in the sustainable and renewable energy sector." - Ms. Haddijatou Jallow

Ms. Engilbertsdottir on the other hand informed the participants that Gender and energy are the two main themes of Iceland's international cooperation and that lessons can be learned from Iceland on how local farmers spearheaded the transition from fossil fuels to clean renewable energy sources.

In the same breath, Mr. John Bideri of PACJA pointed out that we need to invest in clean energy and that women will play a critical role for promoting investments and benefit from access. He also said that more understanding about what energy we need and how best to make that energy more accessible to everyone at affordable rates was needed. He concluded that we need to invest in women, and to set clear targets and activities on what we want to achieve.

In her remarks, Ms. Gaye pointed out that we need to overcome barriers for women to access finance through identifying advantages and opportunities in policy making, identifying women entrepreneur champions, and capacity building.
Enterpreneurs call for action

The workshop proceeded in three engaging plenary sessions in which discussions focused on three main areas: (ii) Environmentally sustainable and gender responsive energy policies; (ii) Access to finance and market for women energy entrepreneurs across the value chain, and (iii) Capacity building and skills on technical and business aspects for entrepreneurs.

From the discussions, it emerged that: (i) Women face risks entering the market as entrepreneurs where they are less likely to possess collateral in order to secure access to loans, (ii) developing targeted funding mechanism is crucial for women entrepreneurs, (iii) policy development and training mechanisms should be developed at various levels given that women entrepreneurs are not a homogeneous group.

In conclusion, participants recommended a shift from policy discourse to implementation and emphasized that access to energy should be a universal right and not a political agenda. They also pointed the need for harmonized policies to promote decentralized energy solutions and investments. Finally, they called for empowerment of women and girls through education and capacity building.

Gabonese Ministers grace the workshop

During the “access to finance and market” plenary session, the workshop was honoured by the presence of Mr. Biendi Magannga Moussavou – Minister for Small Enterprises and Mrs. Estelle Ondo – Minister for Environment who engaged the participants in very lively discussions revolving around access to finance and markets.