

ENERGY ACCESS THROUGH A GENDER LENS

In conversation with **Sudeshna Mukherjee** – Director operations, Hamara Grid

1 How do you see the gendered aspects of the conversation on recovery from COVID? What are the impacts of COVID19 and the accompanying economic shock on the women community?

Covid had a debilitating impact on rural communities, especially for rural women in terms of contracting the rural economy, reducing household incomes, increasing unemployment, limiting mobility, and curtailing active participation in local enterprises. Added to these economic shocks, an increase in household drudgery and health risks, domestic isolation with limited access to basic facilities, and related insecurities made the situation even more challenging and vulnerable for rural women. All kinds of barriers - be it domestic, institutional, systemic, as well as gender, made the COVID-19 recovery path for her and her family even more complicated.

I have closely worked with rural women over two decades and have seen them emerge as local champions of change in challenging situations. As part of their Covid recovery journey, women have actively reached out to self-help groups and NGO platforms to revive some local enterprises. These local conduits have been instrumental in reconnecting them with income generation activities and increasing family incomes. Local governance structures and State/ Central administration have extended financial benefits and skill training to rural women to start local enterprises. However, to make these recovery solutions more effective on the ground, there has to be greater coordination of local actors, packaging of 'need-based' interventions for rural women, and collection of gender-disaggregated data on impact.





2 Being the primary caregivers for families in rural India, women form important part of the potential electricity consumer-base. How can we encourage the use of clean sources of energy and energy-efficient appliances among them?

Rural women constitute an important part of the electricity consumer base in rural India. It is crucial to recognize this and target rural women as a separate social category (as against generic rural communities) when promoting clean DRE solutions. We can encourage the use of clean DRE solutions and energy-efficient appliances through them in the following manner:

- Build their capacities and make them aware of DRE solutions and energy-efficient appliances.
 - Extend financing support to rural women for them to be active advocates of clean energy solutions, energy-efficient appliances, and clean energy-based enterprises in the village.
 - Encouraging peer to peer engagement amongst rural women is very effective towards promotion of Energy efficient appliances.
 - Build their capacities on local business growth.
 - Involve them not only as promoters but also as active local entrepreneurs in the villages. Women-headed enterprises should lead the way for a sustainable and inclusive rural economic growth.
 - Create local champions of change to lead by example.
- Populate a particular geography (district as an administrative unit) for visibility, scale and impact.

3 How do you see this role evolving outside the household and in the community, through access to modern and reliable energy?

There is enough evidence on the ground to testify to the evolution of rural women from a domestic caregiver to an active rural entrepreneur. She is no longer confined within the four walls of domestic drudgery. Access to clean and modern technology at the door step through diverse DRE solutions along with low-cost financing solutions have made this transformational change sustainable. This has been accelerated through the following interventions across rural business value chain, impacting both individual and systemic changes:

- Identification of appropriate technology for rural women with gender-friendly machine ergonomics.
- Capacity building of rural women on the technology.
- Training on managing end to end business.
- Training on engaging with local stakeholders.
- Access to low- cost finance and markets.
- Mentorship and handholding.
- Achieving scale.
- Creating visible impact for policy information.

Hence, it is important for the system actors to create this enabling environment for the rural women to emerge as true champions of local change and sustain the process of inclusive rural economic growth.



4

Do you agree that women should hold a prominent place in the discussions during COP26? What would be the key issues?

Gender planning for climate action through equitable growth should be in the forefront of COP26 global discussions. This becomes all the more crucial in the post-COVID-19 scenario where economies are staggering and the impact remains enormous- be it on healthcare, education, politics or policy information. In this context, some of the key issues that may be proposed in this global policy platform driving critical climate action are:

- Global Alliances and coalitions to promote women-led BOP clean energy businesses, towards building resilient, low-carbon rural economies.
- Role of women in energy transition to a DRE-driven low-carbon economy, towards cheaper renewables.
- Climate financing towards growth of women-led clean energy rural enterprises for a zero carbon economy.
- Gender-integrated nature-based solutions(NBS)

5

Could you elaborate on how enabling women can lead to a trickle effect charging the rural society and economy?

Empowering rural women and making them active entrepreneurs can have a transformational impact on strengthening the rural economy and livelihoods. This can lead to the growth of local businesses, greater household incomes, and enhanced socio-economic benefits for the family as a unit. Empowering rural women economically through DRE solutions also contribute to improved participation, increased mobility, and greater participation in decision-making processes. Local women champions of change inspire other rural women to come forward and encourage them to be active participants rather than passive recipients of energy in the clean energy ecosystem.





6. Could you share any instances or success stories that you may have come across, of empowered women enabled by energy access?

We had worked with a women's self-help group (5 member tribal group) in Pasanga village, Gumla district, Jharkhand in June 2017 to build their skills in the rice-hulling business. Ghasni Devi, the SHG leader, took the lead in convincing the group to take up this clean energy business powered by the solar mini-grid. We developed the business model with inputs from local women and explained the model to SHG group members in the simple, local language. We trained them on running the electric rice huller machine effectively by using mini-grid electricity. With SPI's support, we helped finance the electric rice huller machine as the women did not have access to institutional finance at that point in time. Access to financing was a game changer for these women. They independently developed business linkages within Pasanga village and in the neighboring villages for paddy procurement for hulling and selling rice in local markets. They also hulled paddy for domestic consumption. We supported them in developing market linkages in Gumla town. The by-product chaff/ husk was sold as cattle feed locally and acted as another revenue stream for them. Today, this group has turned into a successful rice huller entrepreneur group and is earning Rs. 18,000- 22,000 per month (October to April) during the peak season and Rs. 14,000 – Rs. 15,000 (May to September) during the lean season. Their families also participate and support them in this clean energy business.

This tribal SHG group has also helped in incubating additional 2 SHGs in this rice hulling business and over 5 women huller entrepreneurs in other mini-grid villages in Gumla, Jharkhand.

7. What is the future? How has our strategy to achieve the SDGs shifted in the context of COVID, and where do we see women, especially in rural areas, playing a special role?

We all agree that the realization of 17 SDGs can effectively happen with the integration of gender equity. It is of critical importance that women actively participate and play a key role in transforming rural lives and livelihoods. Essentially it is SDG7 for SDG8 which means access to clean, reliable, affordable, and modern energy leads to sustainable and inclusive economic growth. This requires an active gender inclusion approach and collaboration of actors on gender-centric planning, implementation and monitoring processes. It is important to recognize the special contribution of rural women as a trigger to put the rural economy back on track, especially in post-Covid scenarios, and create an enabling multi-layered, inclusive architecture to support rural women to realize their full economic potential. Rural women's economic empowerment depends on our analysis of the constraints, context and capacities of proposed solutions and hence it is imperative that we all act in a collaborative and coherent manner to take this agenda forward. It's time we realize that we can scale upwards by scaling down!