
COVID 19: AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND WOMEN'S ROLE IN RENEWABLE ENERGY



Covid19 has exposed the frailties of our socio-economic order and further aggravated gender inequities. Clearly, women have been hit the hardest with the pandemic dealing a crushing blow to their lives and livelihoods, especially for the large numbers working in SMEs and the informal sector. It is hence critical that recovery strategies and stimuli should fully integrate gender considerations and aim to provide women with the necessary support to bounce back as well make them resilient against future calamities. There is a strong global consensus in favour a “green” recovery with sustainability as a key pillar. This implies that renewable energy and clean technologies will play a central role in catalysing the recovery. Uninterrupted access to affordable, modern and clean energy can act as a game changer for women, empowering them and bringing about a dramatic improvement in their quality of life, particularly in developing nations.

Renewable energy can apply the perfect balm to pandemic inflicted wounds thanks to its enormous potential for creating jobs. It is important that governments steer policy initiatives and investments towards renewables to accelerate employment across a wide array of skills – technical, financial, administrative, legal etc. The industry has an equal responsibility to ensure this employment is inclusive and taps into the deep talent pool that women represent. At a time when the economy needs creative ideas and innovative solutions to revive itself, the diverse skills that women bring to the table can be invaluable. Research corroborates the positive correlation between gender diversity and business performance. Thanks to being more multidisciplinary, renewables can absorb more women than the traditional oil and gas sector. Currently, 32% of the work force in renewables globally are women while the corresponding number is 22% for the oil and gas sector. Yet, there exists a huge scope for boosting the number of women working in renewable energy, and various stakeholders must jointly facilitate this by implementing the following steps:

1. Govt. must encourage more girls to consider STEM careers through scholarships and tweaking the curriculum and pedagogy. Parents and teachers must condition girls such that they do not feel they are unfit to take up STEM. Universities must work with energy companies to better align courses offered to their needs. They should ensure more internships and vocational training opportunities for woman graduates in energy companies to give them a first-hand feel.



2. Professional networks must bridge the information gap that women face when it comes to jobs in energy. They must highlight opportunities, provide career counselling and facilitate interaction with industry insiders. They must also mentor and coach women on what it takes to succeed and grow in the energy sector. These networks must organize relationship building events, capacity building programmes besides showcasing successful women leaders and role model gender diverse energy companies.
3. The industry must make itself more visible to woman aspirants through regular publishing of job openings in online portals, presence in career fairs and placement drives, arranging site tours, and arranging internships for women, so they can get a first-hand feel of the sector and get rid of any bias. The scope for non-STEM careers in energy should be prominently highlighted.
4. Organizations must adopt gender diversity as a strategic goal and this must be top driven, CEOs must be seen as proactively championing the cause for a more gender equal workspace. Companies must ensure equal access to growth opportunities and eliminate gender-based wage disparities. Recruitment and performance appraisals must be free of biases through internal sensitization and gender-based job segmentation must be avoided.
5. Workplaces must foster a more enabling environment for women, with gender sensitive and non-discriminatory policies such as flexible timings, part time jobs, child care support, adequate paid parental leaves (not limited to women) and mentorship programmes for women to help them grow and deal with workplace challenges

We also must create an enabling ecosystem for more women entrepreneurs to emerge and flourish in the domains of energy and climate action. Traditionally women entrepreneurs have faced barriers like socio cultural norms that restrict their mobility and participation in outdoor economic activities, lack of training be it technical or business, and investors fighting shy of backing women led enterprises. Industry – academia – Government must work in tandem to remove these barriers and create a level playing field for woman entrepreneurs. Various stakeholders must encourage and support women participating in research and innovation in clean energy. We need more entrepreneurial training programmes that will groom women, connect them with potential financiers and buyers and help them convert ideas into a running business. We must also ensure that women entrepreneurs have access to mentors and industry events where they can network and strike partnerships and alliances to scale up their ventures. I am glad to share that recently ReNew Power has joined hands with UNDP to launch an accelerator programme that will provide a gamut of support services to promising young women climate entrepreneurs to make them investment and market ready.

Even in rural India, deployment of clean energy solutions such as solar pumps, solar cookers and lamps can lead to a better quality of life for marginalized women. In particular, clean cooking solutions for women can prevent them from major health hazards by reducing indoor air pollution, besides saving time and energy. Given women's role as primary energy users in the household, they are well placed to act as micro entrepreneurs, driving the adoption of off-grid renewable energy solutions in rural areas. Women also have different social networks from men and can access hard-to-reach households to deploy modern energy solutions. As women become engaged in delivering energy solutions, they take on more active roles in their communities and consequently become agents of change, inspiring more women to follow them onto this path of economic empowerment.

As we “build back better”, involving more women in renewables can create a win – win situation – revitalizing the economy, narrowing the gender gap and leading to a more resilient and inclusive social order post Covid. This also requires women themselves need a shift in mind-set. They need to possess self-belief, confidence, eagerness to learn and perseverance to compete with men on an even keel and have a successful career in energy. Keeping a gender lens on energy throughout the COVID-19 battle offers a crucial opportunity to power a more gender-equal response and recovery, including sustainable energy for all.