

Creating jobs for women in the renewable energy sector

Illustration: K.B. Jawahar

India can increase its GDP by up to 60% by 2025 by enabling more women to participate in its workforce, a 2015 study by the McKinsey Global Institute had stated. However, social and cultural constraints can prevent this from becoming a reality. Many women who work outside home still have primary household and parenting responsibilities that need to be balanced with their work life.

Studies estimate that India's ambitious target of achieving 175 GW of renewable energy (RE) by 2022 could create 3,30,000 jobs in the wind and solar energy sectors alone. Can this rapidly growing industry create jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for women? And can these opportunities provide better salaries and health-care benefits, skilling and training opportunities, and enhance the quality of life for women and their families? What can decision-makers — in government and in the private sector — do to support the inclusion of more women in this growing sector?

Low participation of women

The problem and the opportunity are both clear. According to the World Bank, more than 270 million Indians live in poverty. Further, studies by the International Energy Agency, an autonomous intergovernmental organisation, show that about 240 million people lack basic electricity services. The government has committed to installing 175 GW of RE by 2022. Several of these installations will be in rural areas, where a large number of the poor live. Can the new RE projects be planned in a manner that also creates good quality jobs for women in these areas?

Stop this jobs charade: on India's unemployment problem

Currently, India's RE industry sector, as with other sectors, has low participation of women. India ranks a poor 120 among 131 countries on female labour force participation, according to World Bank data. A majority of women currently employed in the RE sector work at project sites, doing civil masonry work, which is temporary and labour-intensive with little potential for future growth. Moreover, the working conditions on many sites are not always suitable for women as they are devoid of safety and support systems.

Where there is a need for more skilled or semi-skilled labour, fewer women can respond due to existing barriers to formal education and training. Technical training institutes do not admit applicants who have not graduated Class 12. And even where they meet the prerequisite for admission into training institutes, the institutes tend to be located in towns and cities, making it difficult for rural women to effectively participate, especially when they are also expected to carry out other household responsibilities. Consequently, there are very few women in production, facilities, and operations and maintenance roles in the RE sector.

Tweaking the existing system

So, what will it take for women from poorer and rural communities to access jobs in the RE sector? In a recent study, we found that jobs in the RE sector can impact poverty, provided several "tweaks" are made to the existing systems. Particularly with the growth of the decentralised RE and off-grid energy sector, there is significant potential to include local women in the workforce. Overall, the study concluded that if the government, clean energy enterprises, training institutes and civil society work together to implement these "tweaks", India could create good-quality

employment opportunities that can support the inclusion of more women. But such interventions need to be designed with women at the centre and not as an afterthought.

India must create 8.1 million jobs annually, says World Bank report

Training institutes could reduce the bar on entry, allowing for less formally educated women to learn new skills and receive training. Training should be customised to respect specific needs like location, hours of engagement, safety and sanitation. Mobile training modules that can cater to small groups of women in remote areas can be developed. Training institutes and civil society organisations should collaborate and strengthen connections with clean energy enterprises to help trained women secure employment. This sensitisation to women's specific needs can help increase participation of women in the RE workforce. If the public and private sectors come together to bring such jobs to women, particularly in poorer communities, India's transition to clean energy could also improve the quality of life for women and their families.

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When a child faces brutality, in or outside the family, society's contract with its own spirit is violated

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