



The **Lighthouse**
Women:
Lighting Our
Climate Future





Founder's Message



Prema Gopalan

I am here to convey a powerful message from over 1.2 million women from rural India, who over two decades, have been our co-travelers on the sustainable development path.

In unison, Our Call for Action for accelerating energy access and climate action is –

“The time has come for the international organizations, the Governments and the private sector stakeholders alike recognize and hail the critical role of rural women as clean energy entrepreneurs and change makers and not just as energy users.”

Our Leaders of Change profiled here are reversing the impact of climate change at the last mile. These stories of grit and determination reveal how ordinary women are extraordinary role models. Our grassroots women entrepreneurs, show us how they solar powered homes, energized businesses, cleaned up soot filled kitchens, protected trees, water sources and the environment in the face of multiple years of drought.

This UN Momentum for Change Award truly celebrates the spirit of these “Lighthouse Women” from India's hinterlands.

To encourage and advance women's entrepreneurship and leadership in climate change initiatives, we seek collaboration from all the stakeholders. We need to reach out to millions yet to be reached households who still live in darkness and whose adoption of clean energy will lead to the achievement of globally agreed climate change and sustainable development outcomes.



The 2016 UNFCCC Momentum for Change Award announced on 29th September, 2016

Rural community leaders combating climate change | India

Most rural households in India rely on polluting energy sources like firewood and kerosene for their daily cooking and lighting needs. Women and children dependent on firewood are exposed to indoor pollution and its harmful health effects. Because women in rural India shoulder the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of their families, they play a pivotal role in household decisions related to choice of fuel and technology.

Swayam Shikshan Prayog, an Indian NGO, trains rural women in entrepreneurship and builds their capacities for marketing clean-energy products in their communities. Currently, an active network of 1,100 women entrepreneurs is working across 8 districts in India. The women provide a complete 'ecosystem' approach as clean-technology users, educators, providers and supporters in their communities, which helps make it easier for people to adopt energy-efficient technologies and products that address climate change.

Key facts

Since 2009, Swayam Shikshan Prayog has enabled more than 60,000 rural women entrepreneurs to start businesses in high-social-impact sectors such as clean energy, sustainable agriculture, health and nutrition and safe water and sanitation at the grassroots level.

Combined, the projects have reached more than 4 million people across 4 states in India.

Over the years, more than 2500 women entrepreneurs have been trained on clean-energy technologies and have now started businesses.

The problem

Women and children spend hours seeking out fuel for cooking, while the burning of kerosene and wood releases greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming and cause lethal indoor air pollution.

The World Health Organisation estimated a total of 7 million deaths worldwide in 2012 were caused by exposure to air pollution – one in eight of all global deaths. Indoor air pollution was linked to 4.3 million of the deaths that occurred in homes which depend on biomass or coal for cooking.

The solution

Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) empowers women by enabling them to emerge as clean energy entrepreneurs and climate change leaders in their rural communities. SSP operates across 14 districts across 4 states in India namely Maharashtra, Bihar, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu.

As village-level entrepreneurs, women are involved in propagating clean and green practices in sustainable agriculture, protecting natural resources and adopting renewable energy solutions.

Core to SSP's approach is the empowerment of women and girls through the creation of a holistic grassroots entrepreneurship support ecosystem, which builds capacities through fostering entrepreneurship and vocational skills development, providing seed and business expansion loans, facilitating rural marketing and distribution linkages and enabling access to a peer network of grassroots entrepreneurs who grow and learn with each other.

Helping the planet

The project's women entrepreneurs make clean energy products accessible to people living in their communities, which helps cut greenhouse gas emissions. Their efforts, for example, have resulted in more than 100,000 women and households using clean cook stoves, which saves almost 100 tonnes of firewood per day. Similarly, promotion of solar lanterns, biogas cooking units, organic farming, vermi-composting and efficient irrigation technology has been part of SSP's efforts to address climate change.



Helping people

The women entrepreneurs trained by the project have placed the issue of clean energy at the centre of community development by motivating and converting all households in the village into clean-energy users. Once the communities become motivated and adopt clean energy technologies, they begin to transform their villages from non-users to adopters and promoters of clean energy.

The grassroots women act as change makers both within their households and in their communities. Building their professional skills enables them to conduct their businesses more efficiently. Strengthening their position as entrepreneurs and organizing them as a network opens up avenues for diffusion of their innovations.

Over the years grassroots women entrepreneurs in SSP's network have gone beyond entrepreneurship and economic empowerment to embracing community leadership roles. They are now supporting rural communities to take constructive steps to improve the quality of environment, adopt clean energy products and services, recharge community water sources and promote agricultural best practices in order to improve their long-term resilience to climate change.

Spillover effect

The project is based on a market-based approach and can be adapted anywhere. Large companies can take their clean energy products into rural markets. The need for clean energy products is widespread and women can be engaged as entrepreneurs, making it a sustainable solution in India and elsewhere.

SSP has been collaborating with USAID/India over the last three years under the wPOWER programme to expand the rural women entrepreneurship network to more than 1,100 women entrepreneurs, reaching 1 million people across Maharashtra and Bihar. Currently SSP is partnering with Misereor Germany, to expand the rural clean energy network to 2 additional districts in Bihar. SSP is a member of the Huairou Commission - Groots International, a global network and promotes women's leadership in climate change in remote rural areas by highlighting their contribution as key stakeholders in climate adaptation.



“Nobody knew me or my family like that before, with the clean energy business, I have such a big customer network which now helps me in my other businesses as well. I now enjoy a high degree of trust and respect from my community.”

MAINA
GHUTE

Maina Ghute always wanted to be economically independent and contribute to her family. That opportunity came her way two years ago, when she enrolled for SSP’s clean energy initiative.

“Running a clean energy enterprise has helped me come out of my shell and give vent to my entrepreneurial aspirations” Maina exclaims. From a small tailoring business, she expanded her customer-base well beyond her village by learning and adopting marketing strategies. She is now adept at segmenting customers, conducting group demonstrations, meticulously following up with customers and maintaining customer records. By her own admission, she “never thought of the clean energy and its close links to everyday life before.”

Maina says that her husband, who never discussed financial matters with her, now completely relies on her. “I am the family’s financial advisor now”, says Maina. Maina’s social standing has also improved significantly. She says “I now enjoy a high degree of trust and respect from my community, due to the impact of solar energy products.”



“I want to expand this business, not only because it gives me income but also because these solutions address the needs of women, which are always neglected.”

SADHANA
DESHMUKH

Sadhana, 29, was the first one in her village to complete schooling and was always entrepreneurial in nature. Though she did not have many opportunities in her village, she would sell home-made gifts during wedding seasons. This drive and ambition has given Sadhana the confidence to run her own business. She says, “During my training, I was nervous since solar products were very new in the market. But when I shared my training experiences with friends and relatives, they became very excited to see and use the goods. On the very first day of the sale I had a demand of items worth around USD 900” According to Sadhana, the training not only helped in her clean energy business but more importantly, developed a strong business acumen in her. Now she has five different food-processing units. Having emerged successful, she now trains other women to start their own enterprises.

Sadhana proudly states, “I want to expand this business, not only because it gives me income but also because these solutions address the needs of women, which are always neglected.”



“Like the sun, this business will grow brighter and brighter, because it’s the future.”

SAVITA
PHUTANE

Savita, 34, got married at a young age and had time only for household work. It was not until her husband lost his small electronics shop that she took on the responsibility. She enrolled herself in SSP’s clean energy program.

Despite her husband’s support, initially she had to face a lot of flak from her community. Savita says once she began her clean energy business, it changed the men in her village. She narrates, “One day when my husband was driving me to the training centre, some men stopped his bike and angrily questioned my work. He succumbed to their pressure and asked me not to continue. Realizing my determination, he changed his mind. After that, he is grateful and thanks me often for not giving up.” Along with her clean energy products, she also deals in other goods especially during festive seasons. As her business continues to grow, Savita is able to earn a monthly income of USD 100-120 which uses to provide quality education to her children.

Savita is confident that “Like the sun, this business will grow brighter and brighter, because it’s the future.”



“It has given me power.”

SUNITA
SHEDOLE

Sunita Shedole was completely shattered at her husband's death. She had no source of income to support her three children. She has emerged as an energetic leader and a friend of women in her community. She has come a long way since the time she joined our training on business mentoring in early 2013 and there is no looking back. “It has given me power”, says Sunita in all excitement. She has seen an immense transformation in her life.

A world of entrepreneurial opportunities has opened up for Sunita. She started with a small flour mill and a tailoring unit then launched a grocery shop where she stocks clean energy products as well. She caters to her village and has advanced to being a supplier to four grocery shops in neighbouring villages. Her monthly business is worth USD 330.

Earlier, Sunita was not even a member of a Self Help Group, now she trains them on various skills like tailoring, food-processing etc. She mentors them to set up their own business. She says, “I had always dreamt of living in a house built by my husband, but never dreamt that I'll be building one myself.”



“Once a customer visits my shop, I continue to follow up and sell various products to her/him.”

TRISHALA
DANGRE

Trishala, 37, is an environment steward first, and then a socially responsible business leader. She shares her success and continues to inspire an informal network of budding women entrepreneurs. It was not until she moved out of her traditional joint family home that she was able to use her education by becoming a pioneer in the smokeless cook stove market. Trishala became a market leader and popularized both the concept of renewable energy and products like clean cook stoves, fuel, solar lamps and water filters she has. Through smart community level marketing, she was able to impact more than 5000 households. To scale up her efforts Trishala created a network of ten women entrepreneurs.

Firmly believing that a deep belief and awareness on environment concerns and climate change is directly connected to her business, Trishala stresses to all the women entrepreneurs that she encounters to not just be successful, but also responsible.

Committed to customer satisfaction, she recognizes the importance of quality service, “Once a customer visits my shop, I continue to follow up and sell various products to her/him.” She hopes to launch a social enterprise that will market high impact products to improve the lives of women.



“When the Prime Minister of India now stresses on the need for creating solar villages, I feel proud that, this is something that I realized long back when I became a Sakhi.”

UMA
SHITOLE

A few years back, Uma Shitole's life was a routine; managing her household and tailoring from her home. Seldom venturing outside, she had accepted the lack of access to basic amenities like water and sanitation as her fate. From her childhood she had dreams of becoming independent and doing something good in her village. Both these dreams found expression in August 2013 when she became a solar entrepreneur.

While explaining how motivated she is towards expanding her business, Shitole says “Initially when I did not have enough money to start the business, I mortgaged my ornaments to order the products. My business flourished and within two months, I was able to pay back my debt. Her mother-in-law, who used to frequently taunt her, now considers her as an asset and never stops to tell others, how Uma is a successful business woman and a community leader.”

Uma enjoys active support from the local government and other opinion leaders, in driving the agenda of social change.



“Earlier I could not even move out of the house, today none of the decisions are made without my consent.”

VARSHA
PAWAR

Varsha, 34, has found a new economic and social identity as a responsible entrepreneur in her village. Each day she encourages other women to be independent and to find their own identity. As part of her village self help group, she got her first opportunity to move out of her home and market solar lamps. “This work gave me so much recognition that villagers encouraged me to contest for the post of President of the Village Council which I did and won with their support”, mused Varsha.

Varsha has sold more than 800 solar lanterns, a record among all energy Sakhis. Her secret to success was to address hundreds of women in self help groups and follow it up with demonstrations of the clean energy products. She had never imagined that she could grow to be an entrepreneur one day, from a farm worker. Her household income increased by about USD 80 a month and she wants to expand her business. Her husband is now proud of her achievements and respects her skills. Varsha proudly states, “Earlier I could not even move out of the house, today none of the household decisions are made without my consent.”



“The clean energy program has helped me to come out of my shell and gave light to my entrepreneurial aspirations.”

KAMAL
KUMBHAR

Today, Kamal Kumar is a confident and dynamic entrepreneur. She wasn't always like this. “Earlier, I was shy and limited myself to household chores and at best, I would have been a farm worker all my life. By joining the green energy & climate network, my everyday life has changed dramatically.”

Kamal is now a serial entrepreneur. She manages several businesses – most important among them are the agri allied and clean energy business. Kamal states, “The clean energy business was the first, it helped me to come out of my shell and gave light to my aspiration. And with this success I bought land and my farm from one to four acres”. She shares her success with many women. All of Kamal's new ventures involve women as she does not want to leave any woman behind.

Her farm and business site act as a magnet for new women to learn. Besides, Kamal's success as a super entrepreneur attracts a minimum of ten visitors a day. Both men and women come from far, to learn and replicate her success in enterprise and greening the environment.



“All my customers keep enquiring for new green energy products and my business has grown, and given a boost to my family business as well. People keep visiting our home, more often now.”

SHASHIKALA
DONGRE

Shashikala had a small tailoring unit and her life was restricted to her home and village. Her husband, who was already a business man, encouraged her to start a green energy enterprise. After the entrepreneurship training, she not only established her business, but also took up solving problems in the community related to safe water, girls' education and livelihoods. She says, “All my customers keep enquiring for new green energy products and my business has grown, and given a boost to my family business as well. People keep visiting our home, more often now.” Shashikala is now a member of the Village Development Committee.

A recognized community development leader, she is more often than not, called to resolve conflicts. Being a green entrepreneur she has a new outlook on environment issues, and is invited to speak in public platforms. She is well traveled and she went as far as to Indonesia as part of an entrepreneur exchange program.



“I have now understood why we need to eat healthy. I grow vegetables and pulses for my family and also manage to sell some in the market.”

SHANTABAI
RATHORE

Shantabai says, earlier, every day we used to wake up and go to work in others' farms. In return, we used to get a share of the crops (mostly wheat). We did not get paid in cash. All we had as a meal was a piece of Indian wheat bread and chewed chillies as a side dish. That is whenever we ate a meal at home. Sometimes, we went to sleep on hungry stomachs too.”

Later Shanta took a loan and leased out land which she cultivated. She joined the Women Farmers' Group linked to SSP, to learn how she could make her farm viable. As part of the low input agriculture training, Shanta gained information on food security through good farming practices. “I have now understood why we need to eat healthy. I grow vegetables and pulses for my family and also manage to sell some in the market. I use inter-cropping and multi-cropping methods. We now are able to have organic home-grown fresh vegetables and pulses in every meal at least two times a day.” She adds, “Even when we again faced two consecutive years of drought, it is a record that not a single household sold their livestock for survival.” Nor did any of the families face intense distress in this year's intense crisis, as several women like me, have taken the lead to spread the word.



“Money is not the only incentive, I am now known in my village as a clean energy entrepreneur and my family is very proud of me.”

KIRAN
DEVI

Kiran, who is now an green energy entrepreneur in Gaya, Bihar, was unable to sustain her large family with the earnings from the farm. She was desperately looking for other opportunities to increase her income.

In early 2016, Kiran participated in SSP's environment workshops. Despite her family's support and encouragement, Kiran found it tough to arrange for funds to start her business. She decided to start her solar enterprise by stocking and selling just two solar lanterns. She grew her green enterprises by using all available platforms to market the idea of Solar Energy .

She had barely stepped out of her home earlier, but now she saw herself as a traveling salesperson. Kiran traveled across many villages – to set up stalls in the weekly market etc. Her first order was for 25 solar lanterns and from that point there was no looking back. Though her business is only a few months old, she has a steady additional income of about USD 30 per month. She now accepts payments on a monthly instalments for the solar lights. This innovative payment strategy has increased Kiran's business and her popularity as a green entrepreneur exponentially.



“Sangeeta has been identified as one of the most active sakis in Gaya and says that this initiative has brought her so much recognition and respect not just in her village but also in the nearby villages.”

SANGEETA
KUMARI

Sangeeta, 27, is one of the very few women who have completed graduation. When Sangeeta learnt of the green entrepreneurship program, she was excited. Her conservative family was not excited, and they did not agree. Sangeeta simply convinced her husband to attend all the orientation meetings. Once her family was convinced, she took the entrepreneurship training and started her business.

One day, her relative who runs a small hospital came running to her asking for the solar light as there was power outage. The hospital did not have back up power systems and they were in the middle of a surgery. Sangeeta saved a life, by delivering a solar lamp on time. This was an eye-opening incident in her community, which helped Sangeeta to propagate the need for alternative energy. She marketed many more solar lights, as the story spread.

Sangeeta is recognized as one of the most active women leaders in her district, and says that this initiative has brought her much respect as a change maker, not just in her community, but in nearby villages.



Fulfilling its mission, over two decades, Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP), is a leading learning organization that promotes sustainable community development through empowerment of women and girls, supported by a wide range of financial services, skill building, livelihoods generating and health enhancing opportunities.

Swayam Shikshan Prayog

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