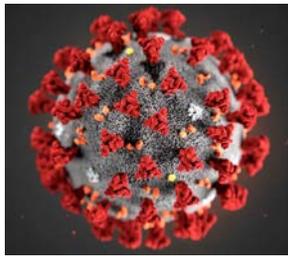


### WePOWER E-Discussion

#### ***“COVID-19 and its Impact on Women Professionals in the Energy Sector”***



**Date:** May 4<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup>

**Platform:** [WePOWER Discussion Group](#)

#### **STATS**

# of visitors: 49

# of cities: 25

# of countries: 9

Page Views: 676

Comments Posted: 91

#### **Introduction:**

WePOWER organized an e-discussion, ***“COVID-19 and its Impact on Women Professionals in the Energy Sector,”*** on **May 4-8, 2020**. This discussion led to an important online conversation among WePOWER institutional and strategic partners, sector experts, and industry practitioners on the challenges and solutions for women professionals in technical professions and the energy sector in South Asia at the time of COVID-19 crisis. We are pleased to share a summary of the ideas, analysis, and information presented by our partners institutions. For those interested in reading all comments and the full e-discussion – click [here](#).

#### **Why we did this:**

The objective of this e-discussion was to foster a dialogue around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women professionals in South Asian energy sector. Through this discussion, we aimed to exchange knowledge on the challenges faced by women professionals due to COVID-19 and highlight some of the mitigation efforts undertaken by our partners. It also gave WePOWER community members a chance to ask questions, gain useful insights from each other, and brainstorm solutions and ideas as their respective organizations are impacted by COVID-19.

The e-discussion informed the agenda of the virtual Business Meeting of WePOWER Partners organized on May 11, 2020. In the Business Meeting, the Partners exchanged insights on home-based work, infrastructure and systems to maintain productivity, mobilizing women employees for essential work, and role of WePOWER and networks in supporting women professionals in South Asian energy sector.

**Note:** This is a brief summary of the full e-discussion. [Click here](#) to read the full e-discussion.

### **E-Discussion Summary**

South Asia Gender and Energy Facility (SAGE), as the Interim Secretariat of South Asia Women in Power Sector Professional Network (WePOWER), invited senior management and women practitioners from energy sector organizations, and academicians from technical universities, to discuss the topics.

**Question 1:** *How is COVID-19 affecting women professionals working in energy sector, especially in energy utilities and in technical universities?*

## **Framing the Impact of COVID19 on Women Professionals:**

**Background:** Responding to COVID19 and consequent lockdowns, South Asian energy utilities have adopted different measures to continue serving their customers while ensuring the safety and well-being of their staff, especially women professionals. Some of the solutions adopted by the utilities are home-based work, flexible working hours, rotating teams, job and salary security, and medical and logistics assistance. However, the uncertainty and challenges persist, and exchange of ideas and knowledge between the stakeholders in different South Asian countries will help in framing the challenges and brainstorming the solutions.

This discussion delved deeper into the nuances of how this unprecedented pandemic is shaping women’s personal and professional lives. Participants reflected on fundamental questions such as to what degree does productivity and performance must be associated with reduced work hours and limited infrastructure, as well as the extent to which emotional and physical well-being of women employees is affected during COVID-19 crisis.

Here’s a quick summary:

### **Challenges in Home-Based Work**

#### **Multi-Tasking Especially in Taking Care of Children and the Elderly**

Dr. Ramalatha Marimuthu from Kumaraguru College of Technology (India) shared that the lockdown has affected working women the most. Cultural expectations, the demands on career women, and the overlap of heightened care and work responsibilities have led to multifold challenges for female employees. She emphasized that women working from home have to carry a major burden of domestic responsibilities, i.e., taking care of children who are not going to school, looking after the sick and elderly who need care, managing expectations of extended family members with minimal support by male members is leading to additional stress and possibly lower productivity.

Dr. Celia Shahnaz from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) also stressed that women professionals have to juggle with many family issues and the absence of external support in the form of house maids during the lock down is adding to the challenges for women professionals.

Harleen Sachdeva from Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) India and Dr. Windhiya Rankotge from Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT) also shared that household work and time management issues have caused additional stress for women professionals.

#### **Lack of Adequate IT Infrastructure, Internet Connectivity and Tools to Transition to the New Normal**

Dr. Celia Shahnaz from Bangladesh shared the challenges caused by the lack of adequate infrastructure to work at home for women professionals and students. Due to closure of educational institutions, many

#### **Key Discussants for Topic 1**

1. Dr. Ramalatha Marimuthu (Kumaraguru College of Technology under Anna University; IEEE India);
2. Dr. Celia Shahnaz (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology; IEEE Bangladesh);
3. Dr. Windhya Rankothge (Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology; IEEE Sri Lanka);
4. P.H.J. (Himali) Zoysa (CEB Sri Lanka);
5. Anurag Raizada and Devtosh Chaturvedi (FEDCO India);
6. Raisa Rahman and Mafruda Rahman (IDCOL Bangladesh);
7. Kinley Wangmo, Bhutan Power Corporation Ltd. (BPC)

students went back to their village homes and have no access to the computers or the adequate internet connectivity suitable for online classes.

### **Challenges for Students and Faculty**

Dr. Windhya Rankothge from Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology shared that learning through online lectures is challenging for students. For universities, conducting online exams is another difficult area, necessitating strategies to avoid unethical behaviors such as copying from the Internet (e.g., using locked web browsers). For some universities, giving access to online resources is also challenging.



(Photo courtesy: Dr. Bozenna Pasik-Duncan)

Dr. Bozenna Pasik-Duncan, a professor of mathematics at University of Kansas, shared that retention of students is the toughest challenge. International students are unable to travel due to visa issues, and not all students want to pay for online courses, resulting in significant enrollment drop this Fall.

### **"Silver Linings" in Home-Based Work Work-Life Balance and Emotional Well-Being**

Not all changes have been bad, however. In Sri Lanka, Himali Zoysa from Ceylon Electricity Board shared that the lockdown has improved and strengthened the inter-communication among women professionals in the form of supportive online forums and social media groups. According to her, the lockdown has also provided a unique opportunity for families to spend more time with each other.

- Important Resources**
- [Service Provision for GBV Survivors During COVID-19 Response: Essential Information for World Bank Teams in South Asia](#)
  - [SAR Gender and CE Note for COVID-19 Response](#)
  - [Gender and COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)
  - [NRLM Self Help Group women emerge as community warriors to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the country](#)

### **Learning and Professional Development Opportunities**

Dr. Windhya Rankothge from Sri Lanka shared that the lockdown is helping women in taking time for personal and professional development. They are attending online courses, and more importantly, investing in their physical and mental healthcare.

Dr. Ramalatha Marimuthu from India expressed how during the lockdown, the researchers and academicians are able to focus on writing papers and proposals for pending projects. She described a surge in a positive and more enthusiastic online teacher-student interactions compared to pre-pandemic face to face interactions. She said maybe this pandemic has made everyone value human connection more.

### **Impact of Flex Hours**

Kinley Wangmo, HR Manager in Bhutan Power Corporation Ltd, shared that this culture of working from home has set a good precedent for future ways of working in case the woman professional has to take care of sick parents/child, etc. Ordinarily in Bhutan, flexible hours are only for mothers who have kids aged two years and younger.

### Work, and Collaboration and Learning Platforms

Dr. Windhya Rankothge shared that across Sri Lanka, academic staff is exploring methods of online teaching and learning. Teaching has resumed via e-learning platforms such as Zoom and Webex to deliver online lectures. In addition, professors are uploading recorded lectures to various online learning platforms.

### Communication and Interaction Between Coworkers

Kinley Wangmo from Bhutan shared that it would be beneficial if we can create awareness for all-- irrespective of gender-- on the importance of sharing responsibilities at home and how husbands, brothers and sons can help and how it would significantly reduce the stress for women at home.

### Question 2: In the context of COVID19, what are some of the measures that energy sector institutions and technical universities are adopting to support women professionals?

One of the key issues that emerged out of this discussion was whether the lockdown is affecting mobilization of front-line staffs such as the maintenance crews, meter readers, and customer service staff. How are women in self-help groups affected by COVID-19? Are the women in supervisory and managerial cadre working from their residences? Is there adequate IT infrastructure to support home-based work? In what capacity are offices and facilities open?

Some notable examples of interventions highlighted during the discussion included the policy level steps adopted by the WePOWER partner institutions across South Asia. Lessons can be learned from these interventions as these services have significantly contributed to women’s safety and productivity during this pandemic.

#### Key Discussants for Topic 2

1. Ramla Qureshi (Women Engineers Pakistan (WEP))
2. Dr. Sangeeta Singh (Institute of Engineering (IOE) Nepal);
3. Kiran Gupta (TATA-Power India);
4. Faiza Savul (K-Electric Pakistan);
5. Shoaib Taqi (WAPDA Pakistan);
6. Nadia Obeydi (DABS Afghanistan);
7. Himali Zoysa (CEB Sri Lanka);
8. Anurag Raizada and Samarjit Mohanty (FEDCO India);
9. Raisa Rahman and Mafruda Rahman (IDCOL Bangladesh)

### Mobilizing Women Employees for Essential Work

The Pakistan Water & Power Development Authority (WAPDA) is WePOWER’s major partner in Pakistan. WAPDA’s GM (HRD) Mr. Shoaib Taqi shared that during COVID-19 WAPDA has been facilitating the female employees to the maximum. All-female employees are off-duty unless essentially required. Work timings for female employees are three hours, though it is preferred that they work from home. All employees are fully paid during the complete period of lockdown. The institutional hospitals are providing online consultations and delivering medical supplies and assistance to women’s doorsteps.

(Photo courtesy: WAPDA Pakistan)



### Meter Reading and Bill Collection

Mr. Anurag Raizada, CEO of a leading power sector utility in India, Feedback Energy Distribution Co. Ltd. (FEDCO), helped us learn from his organization’s response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. He shared that a large number of Women SHGs (Self Help Groups) are engaged in meter reading and bill

collections in his organization. A roster amongst the teams is created that allows women meter readers to go to places where they are allowed to work with sufficient protective gear like masks, gloves, and sanitizers). Flex hours are put in place for these employees.

### **Site/Field-Based Work**

Faiza Savul, Head of Center of Expertise (HR), in K-Electric Pakistan- an essential service provider in Pakistan, shared that their office-based staff and a large female meter reader workforce has been asked to remain home during this pandemic to avoid exposure. Different supporting mechanisms are being put in place to support the working women employees including study-at-home initiatives for their children, a monthly allowance per child for a caregiver and tele-health services for the female employees.

(Photo courtesy: K-Electric Pakistan)



### **Customer Care Centers**

Another area where the WePOWER partner institutions have taken critical steps to engage women during COVID-19 is Customer Complaint Centers. Mr. Anurag Raizada from FEDCO India shared that for women working in call centers, wherever possible, they are providing necessary systems for employees to operate from home and attend to customer complaints.

### **Safe Transportation**

In Pakistan, Mr. Shoaib Taqi from WAPDA shared that safe transportation facility (pick and drop) is being provided to women employees in his organization. Though, the default for women employees is home-based work.

### **Rotating Teams and Flex Hours**

Mr. Samarjit Mohanty from FEDCO India shared that FEDCO has formulated a specially designed roster for their front line and supervisory cadre and given them the option to opt for **CYOS**, "choose your own schedule".

Ms. Kinley Wangmo from BPC shared that her organization has for the first time introduced a work from home system and they are in the process of studying through survey how effective the system is.

### **Upskilling Programs for Female Employees**

Mr. Samarjit Mohanty from India shared that FEDCO has designed virtual e-gateways for upskilling and reskilling of their female employees. They are conducting knowledge sharing sessions and customized courses for female employees between 2:30 pm and 6:00 pm, when most of the household work is done and women are relatively less occupied.

**Question 3: What role can WePOWER and the network's Partners play in fostering knowledge exchange and in finding practical solutions to deal with challenges faced by women professionals due to COVID19?**

There is much to learn from evidence and examples across the region on interventions worth scaling, replicating, or investigating further. Below are some of the suggestions shared by the discussants.

### Access to Job Opportunities, Professional Development and Learning Opportunities

In Bangladesh, according to Dr. Celia Shahnaz from BUET, the activities have slowed down considerably. Private sector financed projects have mostly female engineers employed and have directly impacted women’s job opportunities.

According to Ramla Qureshi, CEO of WEP Pakistan, all technical training programs have been halted to avoid the spread of COVID-19. The gravest challenge, she said, is for the young graduating female engineers who will face severe difficulty in finding a job next year.

### Career Counseling

#### Internships

In Afghanistan, according to Nadia Obeydi (Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS)), all recruitment and internship programs have been stopped.

In Pakistan, Ramla Qureshi shared, internships are rescinded or rescheduled. For the students, this summer would have been the only option to add industry experience to their portfolios before graduation. She shared that her grassroots organization is helping some students with online or WFH opportunities.

#### Key Discussants for Topic 3

1. Nameerah Hameed (WIE Pakistan);
2. Dr. Bozena Pasik-Duncan (IEEE WIE USA);
3. Dr. Windhya Rankothge (Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology; IEEE Sri Lanka Section);
4. Kinley Wangmo (BPC Bhutan);
5. Harleen Sachdeva (EESL India);
6. Raisa Rahman and Mafruda Rahman (IDCOL Bangladesh)

### E-Learning Opportunities Between the Partners

Harleen Sachdeva from EESL (India) shared the need to invest in skills development of women professionals on topics such as time management, conflict management, quick decision making, and delegation of work. She also underscored the importance of the employers having understanding and empathy regarding the challenges associated with work-from-home.

Nameerah Qureshi, CEO of Women in Energy (WIE) Pakistan, suggested that WePOWER, through its convening power, can facilitate virtual synergies to provide better infrastructure to teach and work remotely, even though that is beyond its original scope. She shared numerous activities that her organization is leading to ensure that the fellow women in energy continue to get all the help and support they need to grow personally and professionally during this time.

### How do we meaningfully capture and learn from this discussion?

Here are some other suggestions offered by the discussants:

- Using the posts from this e-discussion, WePOWER can organize **workshops** on women professionals’ **mental health and well-being** and host awareness sessions **on work-life balance**;
- **“Learning” stories** to systematically compile lessons from what worked, did not work and why;
- Some measures by members of WePOWER that are recommended as policy adoption in post-COVID-19 times, such as women employees working from home twice a week, etc.;



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- A **“Speakers bureau”** with outstanding virtual presentations in the area of power and energy;
  - WePOWER can build and disseminate a **“Digital Library of Best Practices”** by its partners;
  - WePOWER could develop a **voluntary WePOWER COVID-19 working group** for deeper knowledge exchange and to share best practices.

**The WePOWER team extends special thanks to all our partners and colleagues who took the time to participate in this e-discussion and offered great insights, reflections and suggestions.**