

Gender Mainstreaming in the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board

A Gender Equity Strategy and Action Plan has been integrated into the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board's Master Plan. Implementation of this plan will be the first gender mainstreaming exercise in the energy sector in Bangladesh, and possibly in the world.

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In May 2003, ENERGIA was invited by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh to develop a comprehensive Gender Equity Strategy (GES) and Action Plan (AP) for integration into the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board's (REB) Master Plan. A gender equity strategy is a multifaceted instrument for organisations, including policy, ways of working and the provision of resources and facilities, for reaching specified objectives. It is a tool of gender mainstreaming; a way of ensuring that policy decision-making takes account of women's and men's different interests and needs, in this case both as employees and clients. The Action Plan is a means of operationalising the gender equity strategy.

Despite the strong commitment by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls, the follow-up activities by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, to the Beijing Platform for Action, have unfortunately not as yet included the energy sector. However, by integrating the GES into its Master Plan, and implementing the Action Plan, the REB will undertake not only the first gender mainstreaming exercise in the energy sector in Bangladesh but also possibly in the world.

Such an exercise benefits the REB and the rural electricity cooperatives (Palli Bidyut Somities - PBSs) that supply the consumers by:

- Increased profitability through an extended consumer base.
 - Recognition of a wider pool of capable, well-educated potential employees on which to draw.
 - Enabling the organisations to comply with GoB Gender targets.
- The overall aim of the GES is to create a "win-win" situation for the REB, PBSs, their employees and consumers.



Literacy programmes for women held in the evening can contribute substantially to empowering them (Photo: Lailun Nahar Ekram)

The ENERGIA Team and their Methodology

ENERGIA, represented by Joy Clancy and Elizabeth Cecelski, developed the GES with a team of local counterparts, headed by Ms Lailun Nahar Ekram from ECBL in association with Dr Nazmunnessa Mhatab and Dr Sadeka Halim. The methodology employed to develop the GES consisted of four components:

- (i) Consultation with the REB and PBSs, NGOs, development partners, financial institutes, local communities, PBS board members, and consumers in order to identify issues and elements that should be the focus of the GES.
- (ii) An analysis of existing policies, official reports and documents; as well as learning from the experiences of an earlier GES exercise in the Local Government Engineering Department.
- (iii) Consultations with the REB's and PBSs' officials and staff on their existing organisational structure and human resources policies.
- (iv) A Feedback Workshop on the draft GES and AP with invited resource persons and stakeholders, including staff from the REB and PBSs.

The final draft of the GES and AP was presented to the REB in May 2004.

Findings: Existing Status of Women as Consumers, Managers and Employees

The impact of electricity on the lives of rural women in Bangladesh is described in more detail elsewhere in this issue of ENERGIA News. However, it is worthwhile repeating that electricity in rural areas has increased the employment opportunities for women in electrified households which, in turn, appears to translate into greater control over their income than women in non-electrified households. Access to TV and radio are considered important factors in changing attitudes. Unfortunately, access to electricity does not appear to have influenced the prevailing gender division of labour: women's responsibilities have remained largely the same as those of their counterparts in the non-electrified households. However, in electrified households, women have more flexibility and are able to organise their work according to their convenience which they see as a benefit.

"Our household work has reduced a lot because of electricity. Apart from learning about various issues like vegetable gardening and poultry through TV/Radio, we are able to spend more time in teaching kids due to this additional time". (Focus Group discussion with female household members; Village: Rahmatpur, Union: Rahmatpur, Thana: Babuganj, District: Barisal) HDRC (2002).

The REB currently supplies electricity to 67 PBSs. Each PBS's members elect a Board of Directors which oversees PBS affairs at the policy level, planning and control. There are a small number of reserved seats for women on each Board. These reserved seats exist because it is considered unlikely that women will be directly elected to the Board since few women qualify either to stand for election to the PBS Boards or to vote. The inequality in voting rights arises from the way in which PBSs define a "consumer", the person entitled to vote, as the legal owner of the house with a connection. Since the legal owner is usually a man, this definition of "consumer" results in few women being so designated. Thus, despite the fact that women, in male-headed households, are the main users and managers of household electricity they are not able to participate in the democratic process related to decision-making on PBS policies.

The women advisors, unlike the male members, have no voting rights. This situation contradicts the democratic principles that underlie the establishment of the PBS system. It denies a broader cross-section of women a real voice in the running of the PBSs.

The number of women professionals in the REB and the PBSs is very small. For example, as of mid-2003, within the REB, only five Deputy Directors, out of a total of 25, were female. Only one Assistant Engineer out of 152 was female. In the PBSs, only one Class I officer (Senior Management) out of 591 officers was a woman. Such a small representation at senior levels gives women negligible opportunities for making inputs and influencing outcomes at the policy, institutional and implementation levels, thus creating considerable gender imbalance in decision-making and outcomes. A particularly disturbing finding is that sexual harassment is a generally unspoken but serious problem for the women employed in the REB and the PBSs.

Issues to be Addressed

The GES aims to create an environment in which women and men have equal input into the policy planning, operation and management

of REB and PBS projects and programmes, so that women and men as consumers will benefit equally from rural electricity programmes. In order to achieve this, the ENERGIA team identified three categories of issues which need to be addressed by the GES: organisational issues (creating more gender-sensitive, women-friendly organisations), allowing women to reach their full potential as employees of the REB and the PBSs, and empowering rural women as electricity users. The GES has, within these three categories, nine components, which in turn, provide the framework for the Action Plan:

Organisational Issues

- Institutional Strengthening
- Funding and Resources
- Socioeconomic Baseline Database System
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Communication and Networking

Increasing Gender Equity of Women Employees

- Human Resource Development
- Social Safety
- Support and Logistics Facilities

Table 1: Recommendations for different levels for implementing successfully the GES and AP.

Macrolevel REB Policies	Mesolevel PBS	Community Level Rural Consumer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporation of the GES and the AP into the REB Master Plan. • REB includes, in its policies, its commitment to a social wellbeing approach towards women, in line with the policies of the GoB. • REB acknowledges that the principles of gender equity extend beyond the Master Plan period. • The development of a strategy to co-ordinate and cooperate with relevant ministries, institutes and donor agencies in the implementation of the GES and the Action Plan. <p>Implementation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The establishment of a Gender Focal Point within the Socio-economic Evaluation and Monitoring Cell, and the allocation of sufficient resources for the implementation of the GES. • The creation of gender-sensitive databases on employment and consumers. • The establishment of a system for the monitoring of the implementation of the AP and the updating of the GES. • In order to help overcome resistance to policies on gender equity, the development of an awareness raising programme for REB employees on the need for, and the benefits of, gender mainstreaming. • Translation of the GES and AP into the Bangla language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PBSs to work with the REB to develop a strategy for addressing the gender issues as set out in the GES and the AP. • PBSs to develop a capacity building programme to provide skills to their employees for applying gender sensitisation, gender analysis and gender impact assessment skills at all stages in the REB project cycles. • PBSs to develop capacity building that creates a more gender-sensitive approach to recruitment, promotion, and staff retention. • PBSs to adopt a more gender-sensitive approach in working with clients. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The formation of Village Electricity Committees in each PBS with a good gender balance from Electrified Households, Non-electrified Households, NGO, and CBO representatives. • Establishment of training courses for women and men in the PBS areas to provide the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful participation in management and decision-making on the VECs and the PBS boards. • Training of men to practice gender-sensitivity in creating space for women's voices to be heard. • The creation of partnerships between PBSs and CBOs so that these organisations can help rural people develop their advocacy skills. • The creation of partnerships between PBSs and NGOs, CBOs and other organisations within Civil Society so that these organisations can play a vital intermediary role in advocating, promoting and the awareness-building of gender equality within the VECs. • The development of visual and spoken media (such as plays) to promote the use of electricity. • The development of women's communication skills to enable their effective participation in the PBSs.

Rural Women's Empowerment

- Participation and Participatory Processes

For each activity, within the AP, a measurable indicator is given, along with a timeframe for implementation and an identified responsible stakeholder for implementing the activity. Each component has its own specific output and outcome. Table 1 lists some recommendations for the three levels (REB, PBS and community) which can lead to the successful implementation of the GES and AP.

Reference

HDRC (2002), *Economic and Social Impact Evaluation Study of Rural Electrification Program*. Human Development Research Centre (HDRC) under contract with NRECA International Ltd. (USAID CA 388-A-00-97-00040-00)



Access to TV and radio has given women more opportunities for learning and leisure (Photo: Lailun Nahar Ekram)



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◆ A graduate of Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology and a Fulbright Scholar, Lailun Nahar Ekram attained her Masters Degree in Architecture from the State University of New York, Buffalo, USA. Lailun Nahar Ekram is a researcher, practitioner, technical reviewer, strategist and an academician. She set up the first woman-headed engineering and architectural

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