

LESSONS LEARNED FROM
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT FUND

Solar Sister



COMPANY PROFILE

YEAR ESTABLISHED
2010

COUNTRIES OF OPERATION
Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION
Last mile distributor of solar and clean cooking technologies

FUNDING
Women's Empowerment Fund Round 2



Since 2010, Solar Sister has recruited over **2,500** clean energy entrepreneurs that have delivered solar and clean cooking solutions to over **800,000** beneficiaries across Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania.

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ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW

Solar Sister is a network of African women bringing life-changing, affordable clean energy to their communities. Katherine Lucey founded Solar Sister in 2010 in order to address the severe gap in distribution of modern energy technologies to the rural poor where women make up the majority of the market. Solar Sister recruits, trains and mentors women entrepreneurs to sell solar and clean cooking products in their communities, generating an income.

When women act as salespeople, they help reach more rural women while also being economically empowered themselves. However, Solar Sister also recognizes that women face unique challenges in entering the technology market. Consequently, Solar Sister provides a package of inputs that includes business coaching, training, mentoring and start up kits to its network of women entrepreneurs to help kick start and grow their businesses. Since 2010, Solar Sister has recruited over 2,500 clean energy entrepreneurs that have delivered solar and clean cooking solutions to over 800,000 beneficiaries across Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania.

STORY SPOTLIGHT: SHARON STEPHEN

Solar Sister has already begun to take lessons learned from the Uganda pilot Empowered Entrepreneur Training of Trainers (TOT) and apply them to its work with women entrepreneurs in Nigeria and Tanzania. Sharon Stephen is one of the Business Development Associates in Nigeria who benefited from the inclusion of the empowered entrepreneur training in Solar Sister's training program for staff. Sharon attended a master training certification program hosted by USAID, and in March 2017, implemented a customized, one-day empowerment training with 9 entrepreneurs (8 women and 1 man) in Yola, Nigeria. The WEF grant enabled Solar Sister to utilize curriculum and training tools created in Uganda across its other focus countries. In addition, due to the TOT in Uganda, Leadership Team members had the skills and knowledge to support Sharon and other trainers in their work.

“My entrepreneurs found the whole training interesting because it was basically a self-empowerment training rather than other usual trainings they do attend, which is mostly on skill acquisition or to gain a certain knowledge.”

– SHARON STEPHEN,
NIGERIA BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE



SOLAR SISTER EMPOWERMENT TRAINING SESSION

GRANT OBJECTIVE

Solar Sister's goal under the Women's Empowerment Fund was to strengthen its package of support for women entrepreneurs by integrating empowerment and leadership curriculum. With support from the Alliance, Solar Sister partnered with the lead authors of the *Empowered Entrepreneur Training Handbook* to pilot the training in Solar Sister's last mile, rural setting. The *Handbook* was designed to support organizations and trainers in empowering women micro-entrepreneurs, small enterprise owners, and sales agents working in the household energy sector. This curriculum was particularly attractive to Solar Sister as it focuses on the internal factors that prevent women from succeeding in business, utilizing agency-based empowerment concepts and leadership strategies to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of entrepreneurs. By incorporating an agency-based curriculum into its comprehensive training platform, Solar Sister hopes to increase the sales of its network of entrepreneurs in the long term.

“[The training process] has given me the confidence, courage and bravery I need. I pretty much feel like I can do anything. It has also widened my knowledge scope and given me better ways to solve my problems.”

— REBECCA ASILO, UGANDA BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE

ACHIEVEMENTS OF GRANT

The Women's Empowerment Fund provided the needed resources for Solar Sister to test the effectiveness and scalability of the *Handbook's* curriculum in Solar Sister's operations in Uganda while benefiting from the direct guidance and expertise of the handbook authors throughout the process. The pilot in Uganda created a foundation of learning and resources for Solar Sister to utilize in rolling out core leadership, empowerment and business components of the *Handbook* across Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania with its network of women entrepreneurs.

Solar Sister created a customized training curriculum which was adapted from the *Handbook* to fit the unique last mile, rural setting. In November 2015, Solar Sister held a Training of Trainers (TOT) in Kampala, Uganda with 15 members of its staff that included 10 Uganda Business Development Associates (field staff), Solar Sister's Uganda Country Manager, Chief Program Officer, Chief Collaboration Officer, Grants Manager and Director of Training and Talent Development.

Solar Sister found that Business Development Associates took training entrepreneurs more seriously as a result of attending the TOT and felt more confident in their roles as coaches and mentors to their networks of women entrepreneurs. “[The training process] has given me the confidence, courage and bravery I need,” Rebecca Asilo (Uganda Business Development Associate who attended the TOT) says. “I pretty much feel like I can do anything. It has also widened my knowledge scope and given me better ways to solve my problems.”

Solar Sister also partnered with the International Center for Research on Women to create a dynamic and multi-tiered Monitoring and Evaluation platform to test the effectiveness of the pilot at both the field staff and entrepreneur levels. These newly created tools track the social and economic empowerment of Solar Sister entrepreneurs and are paired with Solar Sister's pre-existing quantitative M&E systems which track changes in sales and revenue of entrepreneurs.

Finally, this pilot has catalyzed a more systematic review of Solar Sister's entire training program. Solar Sister is currently in the process of evaluating its training and coaching systems and identifying key gaps and areas of improvement. Solar Sister piloted a one-day empowerment training following the TOT, which did not substantially impact sales. As a result, the organization will be incorporating core components of the *Handbook* into trainings that entrepreneurs in all three countries receive when they join Solar Sister's network on a monthly basis, instead of a one-time training. Solar Sister's new training curriculum, which will have core components and principles of the *Handbook*, will be rolled out to entrepreneurs in groups at the end of 2017.

LESSONS LEARNED

Diversify learning channels. Solar Sister coupled the TOT in Kampala with ongoing learning opportunities and feedback mechanisms to ensure that field staff were able to master the training material. Because Solar Sister's field staff work remotely across rural communities in Uganda, these learning tools needed to be creative and adapted to an out-of-office setting. For example, Business Development Associates filmed practice coaching sessions and sent the videos to Solar Sister's team for feedback. Solar Sister also had ongoing coaching sessions through Skype and paired each person with a fellow Business Development Associate to provide peer-to-peer mentorship.

Foster Internal Expertise and Accountability. Strengthening the skills and knowledge of local staff is critical to laying a foundation for long term growth and success. Stand-alone trainings with specialized consultants require a large amount of resources and if done at the field staff level, can prove to be a higher risk investment lacking sustainability due to staff turnover. Solar Sister found that the best way to approach training of trainers is to first create in-house expertise at the internal Leadership Level and roll out curriculum from there. This also ensures the scalability of training curriculum.

Adapt Training to the Needs and Realities of Women Entrepreneurs. An obstacle Solar Sister faced in adapting the *Handbook* to its model was determining the structure of the training. Originally, the *Handbook* was designed to be rolled out in six days to women entrepreneurs. However, this is a more resource intensive approach and Solar Sister's experience shows that women typically do not have that much time available due to other competing responsibilities. Therefore, Solar Sister is customizing the training to fit within its Sisterhoods structure (monthly 2 to 3 hour group mentoring sessions), making it more flexible and adaptable to the needs of women entrepreneurs.

Simplify and Integrate Training Approaches. Instead of treating the Empowered Entrepreneur curriculum as a stand-alone training, Solar Sister is now integrating key components of the *Handbook* into its comprehensive training platform that entrepreneurs receive throughout their lifetime with Solar Sister. Solar Sister has also found that agency-based approaches to training are more effective when done over longer periods of time in order to support women to build long lasting, strong businesses. Isolated empowerment trainings have not proven to impact the sales of entrepreneurs in Solar Sister's model. Solar Sister has also prioritized sections of the *Handbook* that meet the more immediate needs of its network of entrepreneurs.



The Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves is a public-private partnership hosted by the United Nations Foundation that seeks to save lives, improve livelihoods, empower women, and protect the environment by creating a thriving global market for clean and efficient household cooking solutions. The Alliance's 100 by '20 goal calls for 100 million households to adopt cleaner and more efficient cookstoves and fuels by 2020. We are working with a strong network of public, private and non-profit partners to accelerate the production, deployment, and use of clean and efficient cookstoves and fuels in developing countries.

ABOUT THE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT FUND

The Women's Empowerment Fund (WEF) is designed to scale effective business models for empowering women energy entrepreneurs. WEF grantees demonstrate that there is a positive impact on business performance and social impact when women are engaged in the value chain.

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If you have any questions regarding this case study,
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