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**REACHING WOMEN,
UNLOCKING VALUE:
HOW GENDER INCLUSIVITY
BOOSTS CUSTOMER
SATISFACTION FOR OFF-GRID
SOLAR PRODUCTS**



Photo Credit: Kat Harrison

REACHING WOMEN, UNLOCKING VALUE: HOW GENDER INCLUSIVITY BOOSTS CUSTOMER SATISFACTION FOR OFF-GRID SOLAR PRODUCTS

Prepared by the Power Africa Off-grid Project and 60 Decibels

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Photo Credit: Kat Harrison

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Power Africa sourced, and relied on, social impact measurement experts, [60 Decibels](#), to apply Lean Data measurement to three solar home system (SHS) companies operating in sub-Saharan Africa and to provide gender-specific insights on customer profiles, experience, satisfaction, and feedback. The three companies surveyed are [Deevabits Green Energy](#) (Kenya), [Altech Group](#) (DRC), and [Mwezi](#) (Kenya). The [SIMA Angaza Distributor Finance Fund](#) (DFF) invested in these companies and the insights were gathered to support the DFF's gender lens investing commitment and approach. The Power Africa advisors provided each company with tailored recommendations for long-term gender-inclusivity. This brief summarizes the findings from the study (with 899 respondents; 51 percent women and 49 percent men) and highlights insights to help companies and investors reach more women with clean energy.

In this brief, key definitions, insights, and recommendations are marked with a lightbulb.



Organizations involved in impact investing, such as [SIMA](#) and [Angaza](#), recognize the benefits of working with their portfolio companies to better understand the energy needs of women and develop strategies to more effectively serve women with life-changing products and services. In doing so, companies can benefit from tapping into new markets and increasing profits. This, in turn, can improve financial return and social impact for investors. Off-grid energy companies have the opportunity to attract financing from a growing number of gender lens investors as a result of demonstrating a commitment to advancing gender equality through improved energy access.

Despite the progress in expanding energy provision in sub-Saharan Africa, [600 million](#) people still lack access to reliable energy. This burden of energy poverty falls most heavily on women and girls, who are often responsible for energy-intensive activities such as cooking, but for whom an energy source is not always safe, efficient, or accessible. Collecting and analyzing sex-disaggregated data from both primary and secondary respondents in a household highlights similarities and differences in men's and women's experiences.

Lean Data is an impact measurement approach that captures social outcomes data from customers and beneficiaries, and provides actionable insights to social organizations and benchmarks of social impact performance.





Understanding the different needs, demands, uses, and behaviors of different users in the household allows companies to design and deliver better products and services.

“Before I acquired these lights, I used to close my shop very early, but, of late, I have been operating my shop for longer hours. The security light has been on the whole night, and this has been ensuring safety for my shop.”

– Female solar home system user, Kenya

Although the customer registered in the off-grid energy companies' database is often a man, in most cases there are other household members who have access to, use, and benefit from the energy product in the home. To ensure that they heard from both men and women, the study team employed an intra-household research approach, interviewing the primary customer on the contact list (customer), and the spouse or partner (product user) if available. Overall, women were slightly more likely to report that access to solar products were an important quality of life improvement compared to men (56 percent versus 48 percent). For example, Altech's survey data demonstrated that 56 percent of women compared to 44 percent of men mentioned financial wellbeing as their top quality-of-life improvement. Customers reported decreased spending on products such as batteries for torches and fuel for a generator. Sixty-three percent of women compared to 37 percent of men reported improvements in emotional wellbeing. Customers experienced a general sense of wellbeing because they could move around in their homes at night, not worry about power cuts or lack of electricity, and ensure that their children could study better.



Focusing marketing materials and sales pitches on what existing customers and product users most value about their solar products may better attract potential consumers.

Companies should consider adapting visual and written marketing content to:

- Reflect the benefits that may appeal especially to women.
- Emphasize wellbeing.



“I am the one who persuaded my husband to purchase the product although he also needed it. Since this product has been of help to us, my husband now trusts my ideas, even in choices of other things.”


– Female solar home system user, Kenya

The study findings indicate that women may be more likely than men to hear about off-grid energy products and services from friends or family. Companies can potentially reach more female customers by:

- Encouraging word-of-mouth marketing as a route to reach more female customers.
- Developing or enhancing ambassador or referral programs, particularly those that prioritize or encourage and reward female customers.
- Leveraging other sales acquisition channels such as women’s savings groups and associations or women’s community groups.
- Encouraging joint decision-making within the household by speaking to men and women during home sales pitches.

Data show that only 17 percent of female customers of the three companies assessed have sole budgetary control for both SHS and solar lanterns compared to 28 percent of men. Men and women used primarily income, rather than savings, to purchase off-grid energy products. However, in cases where savings were used, men were more likely than women to use savings.

For the three companies assessed, men were more likely than women to purchase more expensive products like SHS: 35 percent of men reported to have taken a sole decision to buy a product such as an SHS compared to nearly 28 percent of women.

 Flexible financing options and payment terms will help ease the constraints faced by women in household decision-making, including consideration of deposits, assets, and collateral used for credit approval processes.




“My husband and I are happy working together to pay back the solar system. We have developed a new culture of saving. I think this culture will not end with the termination of our financing for the product.”

– Female solar home system owner, DRC

To narrow the gender gap in purchase patterns for higher- and lower-value items, companies should consider expanding their product range and financing options to make off-grid energy solutions more attractive and accessible to women.

Companies can implement gender-smart financing by reviewing credit approval processes that unintentionally cater to men. For example, companies that require an applicant to have an asset base can inhibit women’s access to finance. It may be that women do not hold certain assets because of law or culture, and therefore a male relative needs to be a guarantor or co-sign a contract. In cases where customers are not fully literate or do not understand the application or credit approval processes, companies can establish additional checks to ensure that customers understand all the options, terms, and conditions.

 Companies should consider implementing financing solutions to benefit both men and women, looking at factors that inhibit women’s access to financing.



Off-grid energy companies should:

- Ensure that men and women have equal opportunities and channels to report challenges experienced with solar products.
- Train staff to recognize gender-specific needs regarding products and services, decision-making in the home, and access to finance.

Companies can improve their customer retention by making courtesy calls to follow up with customers at regular intervals (product queries typically arise within six months to one year after the purchase); training staff to interact with women and men respectfully and equally; addressing customers' challenges promptly; and reviewing data on challenges resolved to ensure that equal consideration is given to male and female customers' challenges.

To improve their customer service strategy, off-grid companies should ask themselves the following questions:

- Do women and men have equal access to product specifications and features?
- Do women and men have equal access to installation or guidance to learn about how the product works and what to do if it does not work?
- Do women and men have equal access to the information needed to report challenges?
- How do women raise issues—directly or through their male counterparts?
- Are customer service teams responding to and addressing challenges reported by women and men equally?
- Is after-sales interaction with both female and male customers incorporated in the overall customer retention strategy?

“This research reinforces the need to look deeper than high-level indicators like the gender mix of off-grid solar customers when assessing distributors’ impact on gender equity in the sector. Investors need to seek more opportunities to hear directly from the women we hope to serve, and as proposed in this study, identify a more nuanced set of metrics and targets to monitor.”

– Michael Murray, Associate Director of Distributor Finance, Angaza

In the Lean Data study conducted, the Power Africa advisors found that most off-grid energy customers are men, while the actual users of the systems may be both men and women. Therefore, without looking at additional indicators, companies will find it difficult to see the benefits both men and women (and boys and girls) gain from a service, and the gaps in access, use, and experience between these groups.

Setting metrics that track gender-specific data can help companies and investors to become more inclusive and to narrow gender gaps.



Off-grid energy companies and gender-smart investors should consider tracking the following gender-related metrics:



Percentage of women in company decision-making roles.



Percentage of female customers.



Percentage of women in product sales positions.



Percentage of female customers receiving flexible financing terms.



Percentage of sales from female sales staff.



Percentage of revenue from female customers.

Following the approach of the SIMA Angaza Distributor Finance Fund, investors can use customer-level impact and experience data collected as part of due diligence to gauge a company's gender inclusivity. By setting clear indicators during deal structuring, investors can make gender equality part of their investment strategy and agreements with a company.

Over time, a company and investor can compare portfolio or company performance by tracking sex-disaggregated data. Annual follow-up and in-depth surveys with partners will enable investors and companies to identify disparities in customers' behavior, experience, product perception, and satisfaction levels.

With this regularly disaggregated data, companies can focus on what these differences between men and women may be. Tracking and responding to gender-specific trends can help companies and investors become more inclusive and narrow gender gaps.



Gender-specific data is vital for informing gender-lens investment, whether in due diligence, deal structuring, or post-investment management and reporting.

About 60 Decibels

60 Decibels is a global, tech-enabled impact measurement company that brings speed and repeatability to social impact measurement and customer insights. They provide genuine benchmarks of impact performance, enabling organizations to understand impact relative to peers and set performance targets.

They have a network of 800+ researchers in 65+ countries, and have worked with more than 830 of the world's leading impact investors, companies, foundations, corporations, NGOs, and public sector organizations. 60 Decibels makes it easy to listen to the people who matter most.

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