



## FEMALE PERSPECTIVES RAISE REVENUE FOR INDIAN POWER UTILITY

How BRPL Made the Business Case for Gender Equality

In 2017 [Engendering Utilities'](#) partner, [BSES Rajdhani Power Limited \(BRPL\)](#)—an Indian energy utility—was losing substantial revenue in select neighborhoods of Outer West Delhi. Electricity theft was common in this region, perpetuated by the ease and social normalization of stealing power. The utility serves 2.6 million customers across South and West Delhi, and in some areas the majority of households were not paying for power.

BRPL wasn't the only utility struggling with power theft. In 2018 the Central Electricity Authority of India estimated that 27 percent of the total power produced in the country was lost or stolen; enough energy to power New York for two years.<sup>1</sup> The government sought to crackdown on the issue, and electricity theft became a crime that carried heavy financial penalties and up to five years imprisonment.<sup>2</sup>

BRPL sent male staff into high-loss areas to collect payments and disconnect power being obtained illegally. The community met BRPL staff with hostility and aggression, and incidents of attack on power inspection teams were reported by utilities across the city.<sup>3</sup> Desperate to quell revenue losses, power companies in New Delhi began sending law enforcement officers to recover payments, with mixed success.<sup>4</sup> BRPL came up with another strategy. Rather than continuing to send male collectors to recoup

### BSES RAJDHANI POWER LIMITED (BRPL)

Formed in 2002, BRPL is a joint venture of Reliance Infrastructure Limited and the government of Delhi.

The company serves 2.7 million customers across 750km of South and West Delhi.

In April 2019 BRPL partnered with Engendering Utilities to increase gender equality and economic opportunities for women across the organization.

Of the company's 2,700 employees, 11 percent are women.

payments, they sent women as agents of change to heal the broken relationship with the community, ensuring they were not in harm's way.

Socio-cultural gender norms drove BRPL's new strategy. During the day, households in high-loss service areas were predominantly occupied by women, who were unlikely to answer the door for men. This created obvious communication and relationship barriers between the utility's all male teams and the community. It also prevented BRPL from reading power meters, which were often kept inside the home.

Convincing households to reinstall power meters outside the home was a key component of BRPL's loss reduction plan, but gender norms prevented male staff from effectively engaging community women, and efforts to relocate and install power meters outside were unsuccessful. Looking for creative solutions, BRPL senior management asked Shivani Kumar, the utility's General Manager of Customer Care, to help design a strategy to approach and build relationships with high-loss communities. While BRPL leadership felt women had a role to play in loss-reduction efforts, they were unsure if women—or anyone on staff—could make inroads with communities. Kumar assembled a team of four women with a unique mandate and approach. Her team would not wear uniforms. They would not demand payment of energy bills or threaten to disconnect power. Female staff would approach women in the community with one goal: building trust.

“We did not want them to feel that we were coming into their communities and posing a threat,” Kumar said. “We related to them. We dressed like them. We spoke with them. We listened to them. We articulated why stealing electricity was not okay. We provided a different perspective. Like any other utility,

BRPL's male technicians did not have the customer service background to do this. We did.”

Kumar's strategy was to build a relationship with the women, children, and elderly members of the community. She was confident that this group could eventually exert influence over the household's male decision-maker. Key to this was forming a relationship with the elder male patriarch of the family: the grandfather of the household. Kumar and her team adopted a phased approach, first reaching out to women and elders with tips for reducing household energy costs. Kumar and her team visited the same neighborhood every day for one month, becoming familiar and trusted faces in the community. The frequency and duration of visits was critical for demonstrating BRPL's commitment to building a relationship with the community, and the seriousness of the issue.

“In the beginning, it was awkward,” Kumar said. “The lanes were narrow and congested. Crowds would form. Everyone was listening; I had an audience. The community thought, ‘Oh now BRPL is trying a different tactic by sending women.’ But I was calm and my message was clear and straight: I was not there to collect money, I was there to help them, to build a relationship, to share a perspective, and come to an understanding.”

Over the days and weeks Kumar spent in the community, she earned trust. Families invited her in for tea; community-members knew her by name. Kumar reached out to community educators, knowing that principals and teachers hold significant influence with children. She initiated school programs, teaching children that paying for electricity is a social responsibility. The BRPL team empowered children to think of themselves as important contributors to society with a positive role to play on this issue.

## BUILDING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Research from around the world suggests a correlation between gender equality and improved company performance. A McKinsey & Company study of 1,000 companies across 12 countries concluded that gender-diverse companies are more profitable than their national industry averages.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, it can be difficult to convince managers to hire more women, and women's participation in the workforce remains low. Engendering Utilities helps organizations develop a business case for gender equality to persuade senior leadership that equality is good for business. Gender equality can improve productivity, attract a stronger talent pool, and position an organization as the employer of choice for women.

Developing a business case for gender equality is critical for achieving buy-in and strategic action from all staff; particularly senior leadership. The business case provides a justification for undertaking the gender equality program, helps organizations evaluate the benefit, cost, and risk of alternative options and provides a rationale for the preferred solution.

By supporting organizations to identify business priorities and examining sex-disaggregated organizational data, Engendering Utilities helps organizations determine how gender equality will help achieve strategic business goals.

Kumar knew that children would return to their homes and reinforce the messages their parents and elders had already received from Kumar's team. These multi-tiered, overlapping, and persistent outreach activities were key drivers of behavior change in high-loss communities.

As the relationship progressed, Kumar's team broached harder-hitting topics, like power meters and paying for electricity. Female staff convinced women and elders that power meters should be installed outside the home, and those who were illegally tapping into the electric grid should install meters for the first time.

"Instead of approaching the men directly and having a head-on collision, we persuaded and worked with our soft-leads: the women, the elderly," Kumar said. "By approaching them first, we were able to create in-roads with the men. Slowly, over time, they came on board."

As community attitudes began to shift, Kumar and BRPL wanted to make it easy for households to act. Previously, households that wished to have electricity meters had to travel to a BRPL office, bring documentation, fill out forms, and prove their identity and address. Kumar's team set up community-based "New Connection Camps," bringing services directly to the community and drastically reducing the time and effort required for a household to install a power meter. Kumar's team connected 200 new households to the grid in high-loss areas, enabling them to recover 100 percent of billed revenue from these homes. Her team also helped increase collections from households that were legally connected to the grid but had not been paying their power bills.

BRPL's women-led loss reduction efforts were paying off, and the utility hired more women to scale up the program. At the height of the program, 40 women working in groups of four were deployed to high-loss areas of the city each day; an activity that continued for over three months. Working with communities over a period of months enabled BRPL to build a critical mass of paying customers in select communities, which normalized the concept of paying for power and increased social pressure on non-paying consumers.

"When the project was first conceived and it was agreed that a group of women would attempt to recover losses in conservative communities known to be hostile and aggressive, no one had ever thought that these lady warriors would not only be able to enter these villages, but successfully connect with as many as 5000 villagers," said Maneesh Arora, Additional VP of BRPL.

Following the success of Kumar's community outreach efforts, BRPL leadership has increased support for female-led projects and positions that were previously implemented by men. The utility continues striving to increase female representation in business operations across the company.



Photo Credit: BRPL

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BRPL reached 3,000 students and 2,000 community residents through energy conservation and outreach campaigns.

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## GENDER EQUALITY AND BUSINESS IMPACTS

This woman-led initiative increased revenue, strengthened customer relations, changed male perspectives on the roles and capacity of female staff, built the confidence of female employees to pursue new roles, and improved the company's business outcomes. Impacts include:

- **Increased Revenue:** Kumar's team increased collection efficiency in pilot areas to nearly 100 percent, and over 200 new connections were added.
- **Increased Employment Opportunities for Women:** 40 women were engaged by the company, bringing BRPL closer to its gender equality goals.
- **Improved Corporate Culture:** Increased recognition and appreciation of the important and critical roles women play in generating revenue and executing corporate strategy.
- **Industry Leadership:** The pilot program was so successful that other Engendering Utilities partners are using the example to build their business case through knowledge exchange with BRPL.
- **Increased Commitment to Gender Equality:** The pilot reiterated the importance of hiring women, elevating female voices, and the unique lens women bring to the design and execution of corporate strategy.

## ENABLING FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

- **Committed Senior Leadership.** BRPL senior leadership encouraged and enabled women-designed and women-led strategies that were implemented by women, for women.
- **Confidence in Female Staff.** Managers at BRPL trusted female staff and had confidence in their ability to connect with communities in the most challenging service areas.
- **Understanding of Gendered Dynamics.** BRPL female staff understood how gendered dynamics part of both the problem and the solution were. Kumar's team knew how to approach other women, understood family dynamics, and adopted a slow and steady approach that worked.
- **Corporate Patience and Long-Term Vision** enabled change.
- **Staff Determination.** The women who were hired and deployed to communities had high levels of confidence, determination, and excellent customer service skills.
- **An Enabling Environment Where Women Could Thrive.** The utility made efforts to address the unique and gendered security concerns of female staff working in communities by ensuring the safe transportation for female staff to and from remote areas.

### EMPLOYEE PROFILE: SHIVANI KUMAR

General Manager, Customer Experience and Value Added Services, Customer Care

Shivani Kumar has 18 years of diverse professional experience in sectors like hospitality, finance, infrastructure and utility with expertise in service operations, relationship management, and credit underwriting. Kumar joined BRPL in 2013, and has held roles in customer care, loss reduction, and gender equality in the seven years she has been employed by the company. In her current role, she enhances the service experience of customers by improving communication, raising awareness, and engaging customers with value added services. Kumar is a participant of USAID's Engendering Utilities program, which enables her to spearhead and implement gender equality interventions for the utility.

Kumar serves as a role model and mentor to other women in the company, frequently encouraging women to share strategic ideas, regardless of their background. "Even if you don't have a technical background, you can go into the field and contribute towards the organization's bottom line. I take pride in saying that I can pave the way for other female employees to break away from stereotypical job roles," Kumar said.



## ABOUT ENGENDERING UTILITIES

When women serve as leaders and employees, businesses benefit and company performance improves. USAID's Engendering Utilities program works with companies, organizations, and agencies around the world to increase women's participation in male-dominated industries. By introducing gender equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives at each phase of the [employee life cycle](#), the program expands job opportunities for women while enhancing company performance. Recognizing that gender-equitable teams build better businesses, BRPL partnered with [Engendering Utilities](#) to increase gender equality across the organization. Engendering Utilities supports BRPL by:

- **Providing a framework to implement gender equality interventions.** USAID's *Delivering Gender Equality: A Best Practices Framework for Male-Dominated Industries* provides partners with the resources they need to implement gender equality interventions across the employee life cycle.
- **Demand-driven change management coaching.** BRPL receives expert change management and gender equality coaching and tailored technical support.
- **The Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program (GEELP).** Developed by USAID and Georgetown University McDonough School of Business, three BRPL staff participated in this 12-month course which empowers employees to integrate gender equality initiatives within their organization's structure.

Engendering Utilities has supported BRPL to:

- Create the Workplace Equality (WE) initiative, through which strategic working committees design and implement gender equality initiatives.
- Encourage equal participation of male and female employees in trainings.
- Increase participation of women in leadership trainings.
- Invite and encourage women to speak at national and international forums, including India Smart Utility Week 2020 and Asia Clean Energy Forum 2020.
- Spearhead trainings and discussion on gender equality and diversity with senior leadership.
- Informal mentoring of female employees for field jobs.

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<sup>2</sup> The Times of India (2019). Over 2,500 Held in Last 18 Months for Power Theft in Delhi. Retrieved from: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/over-2500-held-in-last-18-months-for-power-theft-in-delhi/articleshow/71565199.cms>

<sup>3</sup> [Ibid](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Ibid](#)

<sup>5</sup> McKinsey & Company. (2018). Still looking for room at the top: Ten years of research on women in the workplace. Available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/still-looking-for-room-at-the-top-ten-years-of-research-on-women-in-the-workplace>