

Solar Sister by The Gratefulness Team

Here in our feature “Grateful Changemakers,” we celebrate programs and projects that serve as beacons of gratefulness. These efforts elevate the values of grateful living and illuminate their potential to transform both individuals and communities. Join us in appreciating the inspiring and catalyzing contribution these Changemakers offer to shaping a more grateful world.

Solar Sister

Solar Sister trains and supports women to put clean power in the hands of people in rural African communities. This women-led movement works to recruit, train, and support entrepreneurs who earn income by selling clean energy products directly to people without power. Since its founding in 2010, Solar Sister has reached over 1.5 million people across Africa with solar powered products and clean cookstoves, and kickstarted over 3,500 clean energy entrepreneurs.

Solar Sister believes women are a key part of the solution to the clean energy challenge and aims to support those who aren’t reached by business-as-usual energy models. Solar Sister’s Communications Director Fid Thompson shares more about how gratefulness reverberates through this multi-dimensional approach to empowering women, eradicating poverty, and achieving sustainable energy solutions.

Entrepreneurs group in Iringa, Tanzania. Photo © Solar Sister

What sparked the founding/creation of Solar Sister?

The seeds of Solar Sister were planted when Katherine Lucey, a former investment banker, met with Rebecca, a farmer in rural Uganda. Rebecca managed to obtain a solar panel but rather than using it for her house, she installed this panel on the chicken coop. She knew that chickens only eat when they can see, and if Rebecca gave them light, her chickens would eat more, get healthier, and lay more eggs. Rebecca would then sell these additional eggs to buy more livestock, build a profitable farm, and improve her family’s standard of living. She even generated enough profit to build a school to teach local children how to read, write, and start their own farms. If one woman could make that much of a difference with one solar panel, what could a whole network of women accomplish?

How does Solar Sister fill a need for our environment and the women it serves?

Solar Sister supports local African women to deliver clean energy directly to homes in

their rural communities. We provide essential services and training that enable women entrepreneurs to build businesses that will help rural Africans make the switch to clean energy. Helping people switch from toxic solid fuels to green energy sources such as solar, is an essential step to slowing deforestation, mitigating climate change, and restoring local environments.

Our women entrepreneurs are leaders in creating this shift to clean energy in rural African communities. They work in remote communities with no access to grid electricity. In order to simply cook meals and power homes and businesses, people here must resort to using toxic fuels like wood fires, kerosene lamps, and charcoal stoves that in turn destroy the environment in which they live and harm women's and children's health. Our women entrepreneurs are changing this one solar light at a time, one solar phone charger at a time, one clean cookstove at a time. So, not only are our women entrepreneurs doing hard and necessary work to spread clean power in their communities, they are also using these products themselves, bringing in extra income through their businesses, and building on strong existing networks of women.

Nanbet with a happy customer, Nigeria. Photo © Solar Sister

How do you see Solar Sister as embodying/being related to grateful living?

Solar Sister seeks to start with the women we work with across Nigeria and Tanzania. These local women are enterprising, creative, hard working, and committed to improving the wellbeing of their families and communities. They do more and they go further to reach remote communities than most for-profit companies working in solar and clean energy.

Our key values are sisterhood, trust, and grit. And we see how our team members and the women we work with really embody these ideas and the idea of grateful living by the passion and hard work they offer to building better and more prosperous communities. And also we recognize that grateful living is inherently connected to equitable living and social justice. For Solar Sister, we work with women to amplify their leadership, talent, and hard work. We work on clean energy because we recognise everyone should have clean power, no matter where you live or how much money you make. So for us, we see gratitude as a way to acknowledge the privileges that so many of us are born with and that we seek for all people.

How does Solar Sister inspire gratefulness and related actions (love, kindness, compassion, etc.)?

At Solar Sister we choose to work at a challenging intersection of women's empowerment and clean energy in rural Africa. We choose to uplift the hard work and brilliance of local African women. We acknowledge that we have much to learn and that cultivating a culture of compassion, of listening, and of mutual respect is essential to our work. We also choose to focus on and amplify the positive and the strengths and abilities of the women we work with, rather than feed into often negative portrayals and stereotypes.

Our supporters all over the world — across Africa, Europe, and North America — also regularly amplify this message of love and gratitude for the work that our women entrepreneurs are doing and the change they are bringing to communities on the frontlines of climate change.

Taking the time to see and listen to another who has a different life experience is an essential part of how we seek to inspire gratefulness and love and thoughtfulness and kind awareness. This is a continual process!

Mother/daughter entrepreneurs with a solar light. Zoissa Villag, Tanzania. Photo © Solar Sister

How do women become involved with Solar Sister? What draws them to participate?

Solar Sister Team recruits, trains and supports new entrepreneurs across the countries where we work, and supplies them with durable, affordable solar-powered products and clean stoves. Often women get involved through word of mouth, through existing women's networks and groups, and often also through radio advertisements. Women are often looking for ways to increase their income through the business opportunity we offer. They also want to learn about these new solar products and see if they are good value and will save them money! So often women are attracted to buy the product and then when they learn more about Solar Sister they sign up to be an entrepreneur.

What is the lasting impact of Solar Sister on the women and communities it serves?

Solar Sister entrepreneurs create a ripple effect impacting local women, their families, and the customers and communities who switch to using clean energy. Independent research shows that Solar Sister's model improves not only a woman's household income, but also health, education, and a woman's status and control over resources. Extra income allows women to contribute to household earnings and gain confidence, financial independence, and respect from their families. They often also play a larger role in household decision-making. Our entrepreneurs gain confidence and the ability to serve as role models and change agents in their communities.

Customers in the community benefit from the better health, education, and economic stability thanks to use of clean cookstoves and solar light. Over 90 percent of parents reported improvement in their children's academic performance thanks to solar light. Women in particular also benefit from time savings thanks to increased lighting after dark. Families who switch to clean cookstoves significantly reduce the time of collecting wood, the cost of solid fuels, and — by reducing smoke — also improve the health of women and children in particular.

Entrepreneur Julieth's grandson studies with a solar light. Photo © Judith Pinneo

What are some of the common barriers and obstacles that arise for participants in the project? How are they addressed?

One of the biggest challenges is transportation. Our entrepreneurs live and work in often remote communities with poor and expensive transportation options. In order to reach neighboring communities and markets, they must walk or bicycle sometimes for hours. Solar Sister has begun to find ways to provide entrepreneurs with bicycles and in some cases with motorbikes so that they can expand their business and reach more people with clean energy. A Solar Sister study on this found that entrepreneurs with access to a

motorbike were able to reach so many more remote communities with clean energy and increase their own sales by an average of 60 percent. We would love to be able to provide motorbikes to each entrepreneur — but the challenge is the cost.

How does gratefulness inspire everyone involved in Solar Sister to make change in the world?

We are daily inspired and grateful for the persistence, resilience, and creativity of the women we work with in local African communities.

How does Solar Sister plan to grow?

We have currently reached over 1.5 million people in Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda with clean energy. Over the next five years, Solar Sister will support over 10,000 women to build clean energy businesses that reach over 10 million people in sub-Saharan Africa with clean energy technology. See our new five-year plan [here](#).

If Solar Sister could share one message about gratefulness and grateful living, what would it be?

Gratefulness and grateful living is about humility, diversity, and celebration! Let us remember our privilege, seek to listen better, and celebrate the strength of our diversity!

To read more about the inspiring projects and programs of Solar Sister, visit the website: SolarSister.org

To learn about other Grateful Changemakers, visit: [Grateful News](#)