

Hiring Strategies for Fieldwork Positions: Broadening the Female Applicant Pool

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oorja Development Solutions (Oorja) is a for-profit organization that aims to make clean energy more accessible to rural farmers in India. As Oorja continues to scale their enterprise, it must designate gender equity as a priority throughout this process. One avenue of becoming a more gender inclusive organization is to hire more women.

Having a gender diverse workforce would not only improve Oorja's gender inclusivity overall, but also directly benefit the company in the following ways:

- Increasing number of female customers and adhering to their needs
- Contributing to a more comforting, inclusive, and efficient workplace
- Enhancing Oorja's appeal to impact investors
- Contributing to Oorja's role as a facilitator of poverty alleviation.

To identify key obstacles that have hindered Oorja from hiring more women, we interviewed twenty Oorja customers and eleven employees--both males and females--about their experiences with Oorja and their views on this issue. These interviews indicated the main reason Oorja has not been able to hire more women is that not many women apply for these positions at all. Furthermore, we acknowledged there are distinctions between hiring female employees in fieldwork positions and identified that each has five main reasons why women do not apply to these positions:

- Unawareness of job openings and benefits
- Inaccurately perceived educational barriers
- General reluctance to apply due to gender norms in India
- Job hours and logistics conflict with domestic responsibilities
- Specific needs of female employees

To address these issues and hopefully increase Oorja's propensity to hire more women, this document presents recommendations to overcome and mitigate these challenges:

- Put checks and mechanisms in place to mitigate gender discrimination in the field
- New role where an employee advertises job openings and benefits
- Advertise gender equity initiatives in job descriptions and elsewhere
- Alter job descriptions to outline minimum qualifications and training procedures
- Make job hours more flexible and give women an additional stipend to help with domestic responsibilities
- Provide child daycare
- Make job responsibilities flexible to adhere to the specific needs of female employees

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INTRODUCTION

Empathy and perspective-taking: two characteristics that, while intuitively similar in use, are distinct, with the former concerning emotional aptitude and the latter referring to one's ability to evaluate and process situations through unfamiliar lenses. This distinction is important. Perspective-taking allows one to concretely understand the circumstances, viewpoints and opinions of others while empathy elicits the emotional response needed to take action on these new interpretations. Both are simultaneously needed to effectively generate positive social impact. It is the practical application of this specific combination of valuable qualities in the context of social entrepreneurship that inspires the content of this document and the work that preceded it.

Oorja Development Solutions (Oorja) enhances the accessibility of clean, renewable energy sources for rural farming communities in India with services involving irrigation, cooling, and agro-processing technologies. As Oorja continues to scale and expand its social impact and outreach, there is a need for missions that go beyond the organization's core initiatives and require a deeper level of comprehension regarding the communities it aims to help. Specifically, the organization must put a greater emphasis on incorporating empathy and perspective-taking into its business model if it hopes to in a way that truly impacts their customers and employees.

The unique experiences of women offer a promising way to achieving this feat. Oorja recognizes the imperative to make itself a more gender equitable company and has set goals in place to do so. Oorja hopes to increase their number of female customers by 20%, and one of the strategies to achieve this goal while simultaneously enhancing gender equity throughout the company is to hire more women. The organization has already prioritized hiring women in certain corporate level positions by only hiring females for internship positions in the past year. It is evident that Oorja is well aware of the need to become more gender inclusive and has taken action to do so; as such, this document is not meant to overshadow these efforts, but rather, to supplement them in a way that hopefully inspires more gender inclusion initiatives that result in positive impact for Oorja employees and customers.

This document first provides an overview of the benefits of having a gender diverse workforce, highlighting how hiring more women could specifically benefit Oorja and its customers. It then identifies present obstacles to hiring more female employees that Oorja has experienced. Finally, this document will give recommendations to overcome these barriers so Oorja can hire more women, enhance its gender inclusivity, and further embody the characteristics of empathy and perspective-taking.

BENEFITS OF HIRING MORE WOMEN FOR OORJA

Prior to identifying the obstacles to enhanced gender equity and providing recommendations in response, it is important to outline why gender equity is integral to Oorja's success as a social enterprise. This document focuses on hiring more women as a means to achieve these goals, and we have outlined four main ways in which having a larger percentage of their workforce be female would benefit Oorja:

- 1. Facilitate more positive relationships with customers, particularly female ones.*
- 2. Conducive to a more comforting and efficient workplace.*
- 3. Increase Oorja's appeal to impact investors.*
- 4. Help Oorja achieve its core mission to help alleviate poverty.*

Effects on customers

Although Oorja's customer base is largely comprised of male customers, Oorja recognizes the importance of (1) increasing their number of female customers and (2) adhering to the needs of females who benefit indirectly from Oorja's services, even if their names are not mentioned in their family's membership.

First, in response to its gender inclusion initiative, Oorja has the goal of increasing its number of female customers by 20%. As we interviewed both male and female Oorja customers this past summer, we identified hiring more women in fieldwork positions as a key and effective strategy for accomplishing this goal. Female customers overwhelmingly expressed that they would be more comfortable interacting with female Oorja employees. This increase in engagement alone will enhance the possibility of females getting memberships themselves and benefiting from Oorja's services more directly. Additionally, when we interviewed Oorja employees, there were multiple mentions that having more female employees--especially in field positions--would encourage more women to apply for jobs at Oorja, meaning that hiring more women would catalyze a positive feedback loop that would result in even more women being hired. This phenomenon would also result in female customers receiving their own financial autonomy from having an earned income through working for Oorja.

Alongside the potential for more women to sign up for Oorja's services directly, female customers will also be able to express their needs to Oorja more comfortably. The deeply ingrained gender norms in India often discourage women from speaking to other men if their husband is not present, creating a challenge for women to converse with male Oorja fieldwork employees. If women are more willing to speak with female Oorja fieldworkers, then there is a higher chance that these women will express their specific needs so that Oorja can adequately address them. The possibilities of Oorja altering its services to meet the needs of female customers are vast, but enhanced interactions between employees and customers will help make this process a reality. Our interviews focused mainly on Oorja's gender inclusion initiative rather than identifying what the specific needs of female customers are, but this aspect is important, for even as Oorja continues to expand its outreach, being vigilant to the niche circumstances of the people it serves remains integral to achieving its overall mission.

Benefits for All Employees and Oorja's Efficiency

Hiring more women also creates positive benefits for all of Oorja's current employees--both men and women. Out of the female employees that we interviewed, most of them claimed they would feel more comfortable doing their job if there were more women present. The interviews revealed two main reasons for these assertions. First, having a more equal number of female and male employees would be more representative of what a normal, contemporary workplace looks like, instilling in employees a further sense of pride in the organization they work for. It would also give the company the image of being aware of the importance of a gender equitable and diverse workforce, increasing respect from potential donors and other organizations. Second, the employees believed that females are more understanding and responsible, so they would feel more comfortable doing their job knowing there were more women present. Women can complete their work with more efficiency than a man. Furthermore, employees gave their opinions about how women are usually more responsible and responsive to constructive criticism than men, conveying both that the workplace and their personal comfort would benefit from the presence of more female employees.

Women also, on average, possess higher levels of empathy than men, meaning they often make good teammates and contribute to a healthy work environment. A good dynamic among employees would not only make the employees feel more comfortable and satisfied at their job, but also be conducive to organizational efficiency. There is also evidence that women are more efficient and detail-oriented when it comes to completing tasks, meaning that the presence of a female-laden workforce is more conducive to innovation, and therefore, organizational profitability and productivity.

Additionally, many employees expressed the company benefits of having a more diverse workforce. Varying perspectives are important, for searching for solutions through different lenses is the only way to effectively do so. Having a workforce that is also representative of the organization's client base is conducive to creating services that adequately address the needs of those individuals. In short, having more women in the workplace would give Oorja these alternative viewpoints that can be applied to whatever projects are at hand.

Overall, the presence of a friendly, comfortable work environment, additional valuable skills, and alternative perspectives are all reasons why Oorja, and companies in general, should aim to increase the number of female employees in their workforce.

Appeal to Impact Investors

As Oorja continues to scale and expand its outreach, the need for capital and extra financial stability becomes more pertinent. Like many social enterprises, impact investing provides the most promising way of efficiently acquiring the financial capital necessary to continue the good work they are doing on an even larger scale. Impact investments, furthermore, are made based on the potential for social impact, meaning that any organization seeking these funds must have the potential to generate enough social impact to satisfy the expectations of the investors. Social impact is a broad term that takes many forms and encompasses various categories of initiatives; however, gender equity is a popular metric among impact investors. According to the 2020 GIIN Annual Impact Investor Survey, about 56% of impact investors said they were looking for, or at least heavily considering, gender equity when evaluating potential social enterprises in which to invest. Hiring more women is a perfect way for Oorja to show its commitment to gender equity.

Overall, hiring more women would further emphasize Oorja's image of a gender equitable organization, thereby making it more attractive to investors and increasing its opportunities to acquire the necessary financial capital to continue making clean energy accessible on a scale that includes a larger portion of the rural agricultural sector in India, and perhaps further.

Contribution to General Gender Equity and Poverty Alleviation

The previous three ways all contribute to Oorja furthering its success as a social enterprise, but hiring more women would also help Oorja achieve its overall mission of contributing to poverty alleviation initiatives because gender equity is an integral aspect of this process. Fighting poverty via the empowerment of women can come in many forms. To give one example, encouraging young girls to pursue formal education can result in a stronger workforce later on, facilitating economic growth and increasing labor force participation rates. Because of this fundamental relationship between gender equity and poverty persistence, Oorja must prioritize gender equity if it hopes to contribute to poverty alleviation initiatives. Oorja has a moral responsibility to women--both those directly connected to the organization and those that experience the indirect effects of Oorja's impact and it improves the rural agricultural sector--and promoting gender diversity in the workforce is a powerful way of putting the well-being of women at the center of the organization's priorities.

PRESENT OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

With the benefits of hiring more women in mind, we have identified five key reasons why women do not apply to fieldwork positions at Oorja. Our suggested solutions to addressing each obstacle is explained alongside the identified issue. Here is a chart concisely outlining the following section:

OBSTACLE	SOLUTION(S)
<p>Gender Norms Women feel they will be disrespected by their male coworkers due to the deeply ingrained gender norms and traditional gender roles in India.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Mitigate gender bias/discrimination within the workplace by having staff go through gender lens training. 2) Outline the contents of these practices and procedures in job descriptions so applicants are aware of their existence. 3) Continue to emphasize the importance of gender equity at all levels of Oorja. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Articulate where equitable interventions are in place within Oorja.
<p>Inaccurately Perceived Skills and Educational Barriers Many potential female fieldworkers either do not believe they have the necessary skills/education to fulfill these job roles; therefore, they do not even apply.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Implement training modules specifically targeted at women that give them the skills necessary to fulfill fieldwork positions. 2) Alter job descriptions to be clear about minimum qualifications needed and that training will take place after hiring occurs. 3) Provide women specific training programming for field work positions
<p>Job Hours The job hours of these fieldwork positions conflict with the numerous domestic responsibilities these women have on a daily basis.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Flexible work hours. 2) Free daycare facilities. 3) Opportunities to swap shifts with other employees. 4) Provide women compatible working hours—between 12:00 PM until 5:00 PM
<p>Specific Needs of Female Employees For some fieldwork responsibilities, women need special accommodation--e.g., they cannot</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Respond accordingly to unique circumstances and experiences of female employees. 2) Allow female employees to voice concerns over personal challenges. 3) Always partner one male and one female

travel alone.	employee during field work.
<p>Unawareness of Job Openings and Benefits Many women are unaware that there are job openings and even if they were, they are not knowledgeable of the benefits they could incur from having one of these jobs.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Utilize pre-established connections with female customers to market job openings and potential benefits. 2) Utilize current networks within Oorja to market positions 3) Establish new markets within universities and community groups. 4) <i>New role:</i> hire an employee to seek out potential female applicants and inform them of job openings and benefits.
<p>Lack of Women’s Groups The lack of a social network for women perpetuates the gender discrimination that is so prevalent.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Oorja should create its own women’s groups and even invite members of the community who are not associated with the company to join. 2) Provide an environment for sharing both farming practices as well as common female experiences. 3) Establish new markets within universities and community groups and other on-ground organizations working on women skill development or empowerment.

Problem: Unawareness of Job Openings and Benefits

When we interviewed female customers, many of them were unaware that Oorja is actually seeking to hire women with their skill sets. This unawareness partly stemmed from the previously mentioned assumptions that they would not be able to fulfill these job roles anyway. But they were also unaware that these job openings existed, leading them not to apply.

Additionally, even when there was awareness that these job openings existed and that these women were qualified to fulfill these roles, the jobs did not seem appealing enough, especially given other obstacles that come with the job. The benefits of having their own earned income and having a certain amount of financial independence was not apparent to these women, leading them to believe that the timely cost of applying to these fieldwork positions and the general costs associated with fulfilling the job roles outweigh whatever benefit these women previously believed to be true. Indeed, when asked whether they would ever want to apply to a fieldwork position at Oorja, most female customers promptly expressed the difficulties with having a job in general, without any mention of the potential benefits they wished they could incur.

The combination of not knowing these job opportunities existed and being unaware of how these positions could benefit them both contributed to why many female customers do not apply for these positions.

Recommended Solution:

The primary way of addressing this obstacle is to directly prevent unawareness from occurring. To do so, Oorja must make known the fieldwork job openings and benefits available to these women. Oorja already advertises their services to current and potential customers through marketing strategies; so, they should conduct similar procedures centered around raising awareness about fieldwork positions, both independently from and simultaneously with their service marketing.

When advertising job openings there are two main groups of women to target: (1) those who already utilize and are familiar with Oorja's services and (2) women who are not affiliated with Oorja in any way.

To facilitate awareness among the first group of women, information about job openings should be included when collection agents visit their home or when they sign up for additional Oorja services. Additionally, pamphlets containing information about job opportunities and the benefits they have for women should be given during these interactions. Other networks and sources of connection should be utilized when concentrating on women who fall within the second category, but the same information should be relayed

For both groups, however, there is also the possibility of creating a new role where responsibilities include advertising job openings and giving out informational pamphlets. This would offer another opportunity for women with little education to get hired at Oorja, and it would provide a personable contribution to increasing female applicant awareness regarding job opportunities and benefits.

Problem: Education and Experience Necessary to Complete Job Roles

Having the skills required not to only sufficiently match the job description, but to excel at the job itself is imperative. When asked why they were hesitant to apply to roles at Oorja, many of the female customers we interviewed expressed how they were simply unable to apply due to significant lack of experience and/or education necessary to fulfill the job roles.

It is true that there are some fieldwork positions that require a certain level of education in a specific field to be able to fulfill the job role--e.g., technicians and engineers; but there are other fieldwork positions--e.g., sales personnel and collection agents--that do not require formal degrees. So despite many roles being accessible to average people, many women still feel they are not adequately qualified for these positions, and therefore, are deterred from applying.

Additionally, there are some positions that require a certain level of experience doing this interactive work, and many women do not have this type of experience because much of their day is spent performing domestic duties.

So, there seems to be two main obstacles pertaining to education/experience that deter women from applying to fieldwork positions: (1) there are some jobs that most female customers are indeed not qualified for, and (2) there is a misunderstanding among female customers that this is true for all available positions, when in reality, there are certainly positions for which these women are more than qualified.

Recommended Solution:

Since there are two main obstacles here, a multifaceted approach is necessary.

First, to address certain instances where many women are not qualified enough to fulfill job roles, Oorja should put training modules in place to alleviate this issue. These can be in the form of group workshops, tutoring, or educational literature that informs the women in ways conducive to them becoming qualified to apply to more fieldwork positions at Oorja. These trainings should of course be available to all employees, regardless of gender; however, there should also be sections specifically catered to women in a couple of ways. For one, there could be training sessions that include only women so that participants can feel more comfortable and therefore more able to digest the information fully. The presence of these training programs will alleviate any stressors related to some potential female applicants feeling they are not qualified enough to apply.

Second, even if adequate training is in place, potential female applicants still need to be made aware of the existence of these practices. And, there are also jobs where minimal training is needed, for most individuals possess the experience necessary to complete the job successfully. So, to address the issue of unawareness that many women are indeed qualified to apply for fieldwork positions, Oorja should first make this clear in the job descriptions by stating that only basic skills are necessary. Furthermore, Oorja should advertise this fact when they market the job openings as previously discussed. These job descriptions should include the fact that necessary training will occur after the hiring process as well.

Problem: Reluctance Due To Gender Norms

Many of the female customers we interviewed expressed reluctance towards even applying for fieldwork positions at Oorja due to the gender norms pervasive throughout India. They worried that they would not be treated the same as men. These concerns are valid, for although many individuals in India acknowledge gender inequality, they do not view it as an issue. Although not as prevalent at the corporate level, this mentality is largely present among the fieldworkers at Oorja, meaning it would greatly affect any females who take on a fieldwork position.

There are a couple of ways these cultural dynamics can dissuade women from applying to fieldwork positions. First, female fieldwork employees have certain needs--e.g., they cannot travel alone or walk around at night by themselves; these considerations will be addressed in another section--and some men view adhering to these needs as giving the women unfair special treatment. In short, men may belittle the women out of jealousy or not acknowledge their needs as necessary at all.

Second, there are certain situations in the field where women feel uncomfortable in the presence of men in the field. Examples include speaking to male heads of households and even clothing. These uncomfords also discourage women from applying to these jobs. To alleviate such feelings, a dress code can be implemented to ensure that all clothing is appropriate and that all employees feel comfortable at work. Additionally, men and women can travel together to households so that they can connect with all members of households instead of just a man or a woman.

In short, these women feared that the gender norms in India would provide a hindrance to them doing good work so extensive that it would not be worth it to apply to these jobs.

Recommended Solution:

There are two prongs to tackling this issue (both of which must be addressed): (1) mitigating gender biased and discrimination within the organization—i.e. limiting the undesired interactions that deter women from applying to these positions—and (2) advertise that Oorja is taking these actions so potential applicants no longer possess these worries.

First, Oorja must do its best to limit the number of instances where female employees feel disrespected or discriminated against in comparison to men. The most effective way of doing so is to prevent them through educating employees about the importance of gender equity and how to embody it. Exercises created for this purpose are outlined in our “Gender Equity Workshop” deliverable. The workshop will give employees tools to communicate more effectively about gender discrimination and working towards creating a more equitable space for all employees. Additionally, there should be clear lines of communication established that allow female employees to report incidents of gender discrimination they experience on the job.

Second, these solutions will not entice more women to apply if potential applicants are unaware that these policies and procedures exist; so Oorja must ensure that potential applicant awareness by briefly outlining in the job descriptions the steps the organization has taken to promote gender equity and mitigate discrimination and advertising them along with Oorja’s services. Such outreach can contain new job descriptions, women led and focused training, and women specific hours.

Problem: Job Hours Conflict with Domestic Responsibilities

It seems that one of the largest reasons that women do not apply to fieldwork positions at Oorja is they do not have the time to adequately fulfill the job role. When we interviewed female customers, all of them described the tasks and responsibilities that comprised most of their day. The main tasks they complete throughout the day are cooking, cleaning, general housekeeping, and taking care of any children and elders in the house. These activities take up 10-12 hours of their day, with 6:00am - 12:00pm and 5:00pm - 10:00pm being the busiest times. Additionally, while it is predictable when women will be most busy completing these tasks, these responsibilities do not occur at specific times, creating difficulties for women to make commitments that could potentially clash with their domestic role. Considering these hours spent on domestic responsibilities, it is logical why women feel they would not have time to become full time, or even part-time, employees for Oorja.

Recommended Solution:

The primary response to these logistical challenges is to give female employees the opportunity for flexible work hours. Depending on the specific tasks at hand, there should be some flexibility for when these job responsibilities must be completed.

Additionally, there are other ways of alleviating the challenges of balancing work with domestic responsibilities that Sasmita outlined in her “Recommended Gender Strategies” slideshow. This includes setting up a free daycare for female employees so they don’t have to worry about watching their children during the workday.

There could also be a means through which employees can swap shifts/responsibilities with each other so that women would not feel the pressure of being solely committed to their job during work hours. This process would help address the fact that domestic responsibilities are fluid and can occur at any moment of the day.

Problem: Specific Needs of Female Fieldwork Employees

There are certain tasks that women either cannot complete under certain circumstances that are out of their control. Apart from technical skills or education, there are other barriers that prevent women from being able to fulfill some job responsibilities that come with being an employee in the field.

For example, women cannot travel by themselves, especially at night, because women have the risk of being raped or kidnapped that men do not; so they need another employee--preferably a male--to accompany them.

Potential female applicants are aware that these obstacles exist, and this knowledge deters them from applying in two different ways: (1) they do not want to deal with circumventing these challenges, especially if it means putting themselves in potentially dangerous situations, and (2) they believe that because these obstacles exist, organizations will not want to hire female fieldworkers.

Recommended Solution:

The best solution to addressing the fact that female employees need certain accommodations that male employees do not is to adhere to those circumstances.

Although it may be more expensive for an organization to send two employees to do a job rather than one, the benefits of having female fieldworkers greatly outweighs any financial burdens that may arise. Utilizing both male and female employees in the field ensures an expansion of Oorja's customer base as they will be able to connect with both male and female farmers. Close connections will incentivize farmers to purchase memberships with Oorja and help Oorja scale. Therefore, there should be a system in place that structurally monitors the differences between how male and female fieldworkers must carry out their tasks.

Additionally, there could be an avenue through which female employees could voice concerns regarding previously unrealized difficulties that women experience in the field. This way, the acknowledgement of and adherence to these challenges will be fluid, and therefore, remain up to date.

Problem: Lack of women's groups

Within many communities in Uttar Pradesh, there aren't many well established community groups that are women centered. The lack of a social network for women perpetuates the gender discrimination that is so prevalent.

Community groups give members the opportunity to divulge about their shared experience. While the conversation may begin by encouraging best practices for farming and increasing crop yield, groups with shared experiences will inevitably bond and converse about those experiences in a more in-depth, personable way. Ultimately, these spaces should empower women in their respective communities so that they can enable each other to combat ingrained gender norms.

Additionally, the inclusion of female community groups could increase the network of both Oorja customers and Oorja employees. Oorja has the opportunity to market its services and job openings to such groups, and in turn, receive honest feedback about how the product impacts women.

Recommended Solution:

Oorja is in a unique situation to foster communities of women within the regions they are based in. By creating a community group for women, Oorja can create a space to both market their services, for women to have an outlet to talk about their shared experiences, and potentially recruit new talent for Oorja.

To create the group, women working at Oorja could gauge interest within their community, or communities they work in to set up a weekly meeting time and place. Instead of framing the meeting as an open space to talk about gender, it can be marketed as a space for Oorja and women throughout the community to share best farming practices. By incentivizing women to learn about increasing crop yield, women are more likely to attend, and to attend regularly.

The time at the beginning, during breaks, and at the end of each meeting is crucial to the goal of such meetings. Women will talk about their day to day lives and open up about their shared experiences. By ensuring that these women have a space away from men, they can be more vulnerable and lean on one another for support. The community group will give women a network of both support and awareness of their shared experiences and an opportunity to break down systemic gender barriers.

CONCLUSION

Promoting gender diversity and inclusion in the workplace is a powerful and valuable way of scaling a business that benefits the organization, its employees and its customers. Oorja has been successful in attaining their original mission of making clean, affordable energy more accessible to rural farmers in India, but there is more work to be done to fully address the needs of the communities they aim to help.

A gender diverse workforce can benefit an organization in a multitude of ways. For Oorja specifically, hiring more female employees will help them facilitate a more personable relationship with current and potential female customers—the women we interviewed felt more comfortable conversing with other women—thereby building a foundation upon which Oorja can increase its number of female customers. More female employees will also improve Oorja’s appeal to impact investors who hope to invest in gender equitable organizations. Lastly, more women in their workforce will help Oorja achieve its overall mission by becoming more efficient in a way that tackles an issue that has proven to be a driving catalyst for global poverty: gender inequity.

This document identified strategies to help Oorja attract more female applicants, and hopefully, hire more women. These recommendations ranged from being flexible with women and their unique circumstances to strategies for advertising fieldwork positions. We hope these recommendations will not only help Oorja hire more women, but also inspire the organization and its leaders to continue to brainstorm new and innovative ways to promote the well-being of Oorja’s stakeholders, effect positive change, and create a more sustainable, just, and humane world.