



**GWNET**

Global Women's Network  
for the Energy Transition

# Women for Sustainable Energy

Strategies to Foster Women's Talent  
for Transformational Change



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# Executive Summary

Energy transitions are underway globally and locally – guided by the threefold objective of SDG 7 to provide universal access to modern energy services, to double the uptake of renewables and to increase the efficiency improvement rates. Energy transitions have been initiated at national and sub-national levels, in the private sector, in large corporatized businesses just as much as in small scale community ventures, and at the household level.

A sustainable energy sector is emerging and projected to grow significantly, from a current 11 million to 42 million employees in 2050. For the energy transitions to be scaled up and accelerated as required to meet agreed climate goals and to overcome extreme poverty, the sustainable energy sector needs to harness talent in all its forms and foster innovation across a vast array of skills, applications and specializations.

The global energy transition – in addition to changing energy systems – offers a chance for deep societal transformation; it is an opportunity to transition to a more inclusive workforce and to societies that leave no one behind.

## This study examines

- how well women are currently integrated into the corporate sustainable energy sector;
- which obstacles women encounter;
- and what recommendations – building on existing experiences and emerging best-practice – can be put forward to promote women’s participation on a par with men’s in sustainable energy.

As the study seeks to answer the question “*What can we do to increase women’s employment in the sustainable energy sector?*” it initially looks at women’s employment in particular in corporate structures. This should not be construed as to belittle the countless examples of women moving with courage and vigor towards greater sustainability as they seek to achieve access to modern energy services in developing countries’ contexts, often leading their families and their communities along the way. More light needs to be shed on how to fully unleash women’s potential in the context of providing access to modern energy services to the currently non-served populations of approximately 840 million (for power) and 2.9 billion (for modern cooking facilities) in the future. The study also does not examine the situation of women entrepreneurs, be it in the formal or informal sector. To do them justice, clearly more research is needed.

Given significant evidence that the inclusion of women in leadership roles on corporate boards and executive levels is good for the bottom line – increasing company profitability, decreasing risk – AND that it enhances companies’ engagement with sustainability, the persistence of underrepresentation and undervaluation of women in sustainable energy companies is puzzling. This study makes comprehensive recommendations to better the situation.

The **Introduction chapter** sketches in a few broad strokes the **existing situation** regarding women’s participation in energy. Currently, far from being gender-balanced, with maximum estimates of only 22 % of women in the traditional energy sector and 32 % in the renewable energy workforce and with women traditionally underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines, there is change afoot: sustainable energy attracts younger and often value-oriented employees; it is still emerging and therefore has the potential of creating structures and processes that are more inclusive and innovation-friendly than more established sectors which tend to be set in their ways. Energy transitions at scale require more than just switching fuels; they trigger deep change in patterns of consumption and production. The study advocates for leveraging this potential of sustainable energy to make societies more inclusive and just. **Policy goals for energy transitions** have been formulated in several countries; yet, the study finds only rare examples – e.g. by Kenya and ECOWAS – of public sector **gender or diversity policies** in the sustainable energy context.

**Chapter 2** gathers convincing evidence of the **value of diversity**, as presented in international studies both from major consultancies or institutions such as the World Bank or the World Economic Forum. Benefits for companies are seen to range from increased profitability and sustainability concerns to decreased risk and environmental liability. Also the macro-economic case for gender parity is convincing. The findings from various independent sources are then contrasted with evidence of persisting experiences of **resistance to gender equality in the workplace – nourished by unconscious bias, outdated notions of leadership, lack of role-models and vested interests**. This resistance leads to significant attrition as women enter companies and try to move upwards: in industry after industry women are being left behind systematically when it comes to performance reviews and promotions resulting in female participation percentages of half or less at C-level than what they were at entry level. This resistance is systemic and the burden of change cannot be placed on individual women.

**Chapter 3** takes a more in-depth look at **different business models, careers and diverse skills** needed in the energy transition – ranging from civil engineering to communication, from teaching to entrepreneurship, from marketing to science. The variety of occupations and the non-linear pathways characteristic of many careers in the nascent sustainable energy sector reflect the need to attract greater skills diversity and should send encouraging signals to women interested in these various lines of work.

In **Chapter 4**, in order to investigate ways to increase women's engagement specifically in the sustainable energy sector, the study canvassed existing **literature and interviews** with 34 women and men from 14 countries across North America, South America, Oceania, Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, who are currently working in the sustainable energy sector. The authors asked them about their life journey, their experiences of barriers in the sector and what they would recommend to increase women's participation in sustainable energy. Respondents reflected that – often – the rapid development of the sector has drawn people from the conventional energy sector who bring with them a “boys club” culture that tends to be unfavorable to women as employees and their life journey, and difficult for families in general. The anecdotal evidence from the interviews is put in relation to a wealth of existing more general gender study insights and processed through an analytical lens – the so-called Structural Environmental Analysis, a tool initially developed by USAID.

The study in **Chapter 5** then lays out a rich and detailed set of **strategies** – underpinned by **selected good practice examples** – with a view to inspire women's equal inclusion in the sustainable energy sector workforce.

These strategies include:

- promoting girls who have a demonstrable aptitude for STEM disciplines;
- promoting the sustainable energy sector as a workplace of choice for women and men with families;
- putting in place quotas for leadership roles to break unconscious biases and highlight women's leadership;
- remove biases in recruitment, performance reviews; equal pay and promotions;
- equitable parental and carer leave for people of all genders;
- childcare for parents;
- return to work programmes and flexible work models for women and men;
- gender-conscious mentoring for women and men, and
- a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual harassment and discrimination.

Before presenting the final recommendations, **Chapter 6** summarises the **opportunities offered by the sustainable energy sector** as a young sector where bad habits have not yet petrified and which attracts environmentally conscious and value-driven workforce members. It is a sector that depends on innovation and must make the best use of a wide array of skills to overcome talent shortage and stay vibrant. Hence – in the context of profound energy transformations – the sustainable energy sector could well open up avenues towards more inclusive business practices resulting in more flexible work-places which are good for employees, families and communities and nurture more productive, innovative and happier work forces.

The study is clear on the fact that transformative change is the responsibility of the most senior person in the workplace and necessitates that objectives and initiatives are monitored and reported to the Board or organisational leaders as a matter of priority. Commitments of time, resources and personnel by Boards and organisational leaders are essential to drive and lead the change to achieve gender inclusive workplaces. Finally, coalitions between governments, industry and women's networks and associations and INGOs such as the UN and ILO must work together to ensure that a multi-level structural transformation is achieved.

The concluding **recommendations** in **Chapter 7 address the different actors** in sustainable energy – governments, companies, educational institutes, coalitions of the willing, individuals. With this treasure trove drawn from studies and distilled from examples of what has been tried and tested, the study will be a good tool for policy makers and practitioners alike who want to accelerate an inclusive and far-reaching energy transition.

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