

Promoting gender equity and women's employment in electric utilities

Energy Insight

Profiles of three utilities that have undertaken measures to improve employment prospects for women in the power sector

This note is published as part of a series of Energy Insights, under the auspices of the Applied Research Programme on Energy and Economic Growth (EEG), a UK Department for International Development (DFID) financed initiative to produce cutting-edge research on the links between energy and economic growth.

November 2018



Introduction

While the power sector workforce has always been overwhelmingly male, increasing the number of women was identified as a common programmatic trend of international donors in an earlier Energy Insight published by EEG.¹ Prevailing social attitudes, labour laws (especially regarding maternity leave and gender quotas), labour market characteristics, corporate culture and policies, and corporate workforce demographics can all influence the composition of an energy institution's workforce. Efforts to increase representation of any given group, therefore, must be designed with an understanding of the specific circumstances of a particular company. In order to better understand how energy institutions are diversifying their workforces and what challenges they face, this paper provides profiles of three electric utilities that have been undertaking efforts to improve gender equity in the workplace: Electric Distribution Company (EDCO) of Jordan, EVN Macedonia, and Eko Electricity Distribution PLC (EKEDC) in Nigeria. Each utility participated in the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) *Engendering Utilities* programme² from 2015 to 2018.

The first part of the paper discusses the overall approach of the programme, and common achievements of each of the utilities. The three profiles focus on engendering efforts specific to each utility.

The Engendering Utilities approach

The *Engendering Utilities* programme began with a study to identify the numbers and roles of women in each of the seven participating utilities. For some of the utilities, this exercise marked the first time they had disaggregated employment data by gender. The data showed wide variations, illustrated in the table below, as well as disparities in employment practices and outcomes.

Profiled utilities: Women employees (2014)

	Macedonia (EVN)	Jordan (EDCO)	Nigeria (EKEDC)
Women employed	19.6%	6.3%	20.2%
Women managers	22.7%	8.8%	30.5%
Women engineers	21.1%	13.7%	3.7%
Total employment	1,973	1,297	2,154

Building on the findings in the baseline data, the *Engendering Utilities* programme developed tailored trainings for its partner utilities to help them incorporate gender equity into their business practices, with an emphasis on human resources (HR). The programme developed a gender best practices framework for the employee lifecycle, from recruitment to employee development to separation/retirement. Although the utilities had different institutional cultures and operated in different social, political, and economic contexts, the trainings were designed to impart knowledge and tools that each company could adapt to its own situation, thereby institutionalising the knowledge beyond those who participated directly in the programme.

Common HR interventions

Each utility participating in the programme received assistance to conduct a gender-disaggregated employee satisfaction survey and host a *Take Your Daughter to Work Day*.³ In each case, these events were a first, not just for the utility but in each of their respective countries. Each utility also received instruction in how to conduct behaviour-based interviews,⁴ which are generally believed to reduce bias. With assistance from *Engendering Utilities* coaches, each utility undertook a gender gap analysis of its HR procedures, including recruitment

¹ See <https://energyeconomicgrowth.org/publication/eeg-energy-insight-snapshot-gender-opportunities-and-constraints-large-scale>.

² See www.usaid.gov/energy/engendering-utilities.

³ The first *Take Your Daughter to Work Day* was conceived by the Ms. Foundation for Women and held in New York in 1993. The day was designed to be an opportunity to introduce young girls to a variety of occupations and allow them to expand their career horizons. Since then the idea has spread across the US and internationally, and has been broadened in many places to include boys.

⁴ Behaviour-based interviews are highly structured, and seek to ensure each candidate is asked the same questions by the same people and evaluated on the same criteria. The questions seek to predict how a candidate will respond in certain situations, based largely on their previous experience. The interviewers identify behaviours, skills, and abilities that the company has decided are desirable for a particular position, and ask questions to elicit responses that will allow the panel to decide if the candidate possesses the necessary competencies to perform the job.

practices, remuneration, and access to training and promotion. Based upon the findings of the gap analysis and employee satisfaction survey, each utility selected different interventions to implement to reduce gender inequity in its workplace. Critical decision makers from each utility were invited to participate in an executive-level certificate programme offered by Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, which integrated learning on gender equity and change management to help the participants understand how to build support for their gender initiatives.

The *Engendering Utilities* programme ended in late September 2018 (although USAID is planning to scale the programme in a new phase), and the utilities are still working on certain initiatives and collecting data to report their progress. However, the programme reports the following:

- All of the utilities are now regularly disaggregating employment-related data by gender and using this data to help drive decision making
- All of the utilities have drafted equal employment opportunity policies (although some have not yet been formally adopted)
- All of the utilities are implementing behaviour-based interviewing techniques
- All of the utilities are working with universities and vocational schools to increase their pool of female candidates
- All of the utilities are examining issues related to work-life balance, such as child care, flexitime, and maternity/paternity leave
- All of the utilities have reviewed and revised communications strategies and products to feature gender-inclusive language and photos
- All of the utilities have increased the number of female employees since the programme started in 2015 (although not every hire can be attributed to the programme)

Key personnel from the three utilities mentioned above were interviewed to share what they learned from the engendering process, and graciously shared their insights for this paper. Each profile starts with a description of the utility and the gender interventions it undertook, and concludes with a short interview transcribed in a question and answer format.

EDCO Jordan

At a glance

Established: February 1998

Ownership: Parastatal

Customers: 139,800

Total employees (2014): 1,297 (Female: 6.3%)

Country population: 10.2 million

Country unemployment rate: 18.7%

Country workforce: 82% male / 18% female

Sources: Jordan Department of Statistics, *Engendering Utilities: Improving Gender Diversity in Energy Utilities*

One of three electric utilities in Jordan, EDCO is headquartered in the capital, Amman, but its service area is in the south and east of the country. EDCO's service territory covers slightly more than half of the country, but includes only around 15% of the customers due to the largely rural nature of its area. Besides its headquarters, EDCO has offices in five other areas, covering the Jordan Valley and Eastern area, Karak, Tafileh, Maan, and Aqaba districts.

The female literacy rate in Jordan is among the highest in the Middle East, estimated at well over 90%. Women are high achievers at all levels of education in Jordan, and constitute 60% of all university graduates. However, women constitute just 18% of the labour force. The discrepancy in educational achievement and women's employment is partially explained by cultural constraints on women's labour market participation, but is low even compared to other countries in the region. According to the World Bank study *The Status and Progress of*

Women in the Middle East and North Africa, regional labour market participation by women is approximately 28%.

In 2014, EDCO reported it had 1,297 employees, 6.3% of which were women. Around three-quarters of the women worked in the headquarters, with the rest working in the districts. Eighty-four per cent of the female employees worked in administrative positions, primarily HR and finance. Around 14% of the engineers were women. The baseline study also found that women averaged about 13% of the staff participating in company-funded training opportunities, and only 4% of the participants in two internship programmes (one for university students in electrical engineering and computer engineering, and one for management accounting).

Engendering activities and results

From 2015 to 2018, EDCO undertook a number of activities to better understand and ameliorate gender equity gaps in its workforce and policies. These included:

- *Salary equity analysis*: The analysis revealed a gender wage gap of 3.3%, although some divisions (i.e. call centres and technical field operations) had no female employees, so no comparison was possible. (The tool used to conduct the analysis compares the salaries of men and women doing the same jobs, and deems a gap less than 5% within an acceptable range. Users, however, may set stricter standards.)
- *Improve recruitment strategies*: Cultural traditions in some rural areas present obstacles to hiring women in many parts of the company, given beliefs in conservative areas that it is not appropriate for women to serve in positions where they might be alone with non-related men or be expected to travel (custom would dictate that a male relative accompany them). In addition, there was a common assumption that there were no qualified women outside the capital that wanted to work for the company. In order to better understand opportunities and constraints for hiring women for engineering and other positions outside headquarters, EDCO held a networking event in Aqaba to gauge whether there were women both qualified and interested in working for the company. The event was attended by around 80 women working and studying in the southern governorates, including students, supervisors, and professors from local technical universities.

EDCO learned that many of the women were interested in working for the company, and had in fact tried to apply for positions in regional offices, but the male staff there had refused to accept their applications. In response, EDCO arranged for the women to apply through the headquarters, and also set up a system for the universities to forward the CVs of top female students to the HR staff. Despite these efforts, two of the regions (bordering Saudi Arabia) still have no female employees. Headquarters staff believe the utility will need to hire at least two women at a time for those regions, as the atmosphere likely would be overwhelming for one woman on her own.

- *Investigate child care and flexitime benefits*: EDCO undertook its first employee satisfaction survey, using a sample of 105 employees. Both male and female employees expressed a need for assistance with child care. As a result, EDCO has conducted a feasibility study for child care options, and is currently negotiating with the government on how to find a cost-effective solution that also meets Jordan's laws and regulations. EDCO has decided to conduct the employee satisfaction survey annually.
- *Groom women for leadership*: Recognising the gap in training opportunities for female employees, EDCO implemented two leadership training courses specifically for female staff. Twenty-one women participated. A mentoring programme for female employees has also been set up.

By the end of 2017, EDCO reported that 7.7% of its workforce was female, up from 6.3% in 2014.

Q&A with Reem Hamdan, Director Deputy General, EDCO

Q: What surprised you about the various activities you implemented during the Engendering Utilities programme?

A: I was surprised at the response to *Take Your Daughter to Work Day*. I thought the staff would be too conservative to bring their children, but I was mistaken. We did it in the headquarters only, and had 44 girls participate; we also took them to the Science Museum in Amman. Other regions learned about the event, and now they want to do it too. The success of *Take Your Daughter to Work Day* was an important step for us because everyone liked it. The positive response and good public relations stories gave us room to try other things.

Q: Tell me about the mentoring programme for women you've established.

A: It's not a formal mentoring programme, because we don't have enough senior women to mentor everyone. So, we have one meeting annually for all the female employees, where everyone is free to come talk. We've done this for three years now, and the women have talked about their lack of training opportunities, lack of opportunities for promotion, and the fact that some of them have been made to feel uncomfortable at times because of their gender.

Q: Did the women's leadership training grow out of these meetings?

A: Yes, in part. I hope that the training will widen the participants' knowledge and build their confidence. It was not easy for me to persuade the management to approve the cost of the training, and some male managers would not approve the participation of their female employees. None of the participants have been promoted yet, but I believe they're more willing to express their opinions.

Q: What have you learned from the activities you've undertaken to increase gender equity at EDCO?

A: By training I'm an engineer, and I work in senior management. Typically I'm focused on technical and financial issues, but I learned that HR practices can have a significant impact on EDCO's work environment and company performance.

Q: What advice would you give other utilities seeking to increase gender equity in the workplace?

A: Don't expect big changes quickly. Changing ingrained behaviours is difficult, but small steps really matter. The very fact that you are undertaking a programme sends a signal that the topic matters, which is important.

EVN Macedonia**At a glance**

Established: 2006

Ownership: 90% private (EVN AG, Austria), 10% Government of Kosovo

Customers: 812,000

Total employees (2014): 1,973 (Female: 19.6%)

Country population: 2 million

Country unemployment rate: 22.4%

Country workforce: 65% male / 35% female

Sources: Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office, *Engendering Utilities: Improving Gender Diversity in Energy Utilities*

Women in Macedonia have a high literacy rate (96%), and 39% of female university students graduate with degrees in engineering, manufacturing, and construction. The labour market participation rate for women is 34.6%.

EVN Macedonia is the sole electricity distribution company in the Republic of Macedonia. The 2014 baseline survey revealed that around 20% of EVN's employees were female, and women dominated three departments: finance, planning, and customer service. Female employees were able to take advantage of mentoring and internship programmes, with women constituting around 30% and 44% of the participants respectively. EVN anticipates that much of its technical workforce will retire within the next 10 years.

Engendering activities and results

From 2015 to 2018, EVN undertook a number of activities to better understand and ameliorate gender equity gaps in its workforce and policies. These included:

- *Reform of its assessment centre and hiring process:* EVN conducted a hiring analysis that revealed gender bias in its talent lifecycle, as three positions that account for over 40% of the workforce had no female representation. In response, the company has redesigned its assessment process. It developed competency-based job descriptions for each position, and redesigned the interview process to feature behaviour-based questions. Respondents are evaluated on their ability to describe a specific situation, the goal they were working toward, actions they took to accomplish the goal, and the results of their actions.
- *Recruitment:* To raise awareness of EVN as a desirable place for women to work, it is using its female engineers as role models to conduct outreach activities for university and secondary school students. As part of these initiatives, it has created and/or funded:
 - *Apprenticeships,* with a current focus on electro-fitters. EVN has recruited two classes of vocational school graduates for these apprenticeships, 5.5% of which have gone to women. The utility won an award from the European Union for these efforts.
 - *The Next Generation Project;* a customised programme for newly graduated electrical engineers, who rotate through departments to learn more about the company. Forty per cent of the female participants were offered positions in EVN at the end of their rotations, and all but one woman accepted.
 - *A national Women in Energy Conference* in both 2017 and 2018 in partnership with the national engineering society. The conferences brought together men and women throughout the region to raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in the power sector, and were attended by the CEO of EVN Macedonia, as well as the President and Prime Minister of Macedonia.
- *Employee development and promotion:* EVN has undertaken a number of new initiatives to meet its staffing needs while giving women equal opportunity for promotion. These initiatives include:
 - *Dual career path:* EVN has created two paths for promotion within the company: a technical track and a managerial track. The dual path reflects the HR Department's findings that technical/professional staff did not always have the training or desire to assume traditional management roles, but contained specialised knowledge of importance to the company. When the programme began in 2016, women held around 28% of supervisory positions; they now hold half.
 - *Engineering Future Leaders Project:* this project seeks to improve the managerial competencies of engineers. Candidates are both recruited and may self-apply via the assessment centre; in the first year, 13% of the candidates were female and 17% of those chosen for assessment were women. However, none of the women were promoted. EVN is now focusing on increasing leadership development training and mentorship opportunities for female engineers to help them improve their performance.

By the end of 2017, EVN reported that women constituted 21.5% of the workforce, up 1.9% from 2014.

Q&A with Aneta Petrovska-Rusomaroski, Head of HR and Organisation, EVN Macedonia

Q: What have you learned from the gender equity training you've received and the activities you've undertaken?

A: The programme has increased my awareness and enabled me to spread my wings. Although some people in my company thought I just got to take a lot of great trips, they didn't see all the work I did to apply what I learned. For instance, we've applied behaviour-based interviewing in many aspects of our operations, even to select mentors who'd already been trained according to Austrian and Macedonian standards. However, we still need to find more female role models and have them mentor women aspiring to leadership positions.

Q: Have you received support from EVN management in Macedonia and Austria?

A: Both CEOs are supportive, which has had a big impact. In 2016 we trained all management staff about the company's commitment to equality in the workplace. Increasingly, staff are recognising that discussions about gender are not just empty rhetoric; gender balance in our company can have a positive impact on productivity, innovation, decision making, customer service, market growth, and shareholder returns.

Q: It seems that you've already accomplished a lot; what are your chief constraints to increasing opportunities for women in your company?

A: Girls studying STEM [science, technology, engineering, and maths] in Macedonia are more interested in IT than the power sector. I want to see if we can find a way to combine IT and electrical engineering to increase our attractiveness. We are also being told by the regulator that we have to cut costs by 10%, so that is impacting our ability to fund initiatives.

Q: How has your participation in Engendering Utilities impacted you personally?

A: In my view, equality is a basic human right. To have equality, we need equal opportunities. I would like to see additional regional conferences or forums that can expand upon existing initiatives and reduce the time needed to achieve greater gender balance and inclusion. To that end, I've helped organise two Women in Energy conferences, and as a result I've been asked to sit on a national, inter-sectoral Equal Opportunity Board. This group gives recommendations on gender equality at all levels of Macedonian society. This has enabled me to meet other gender champions and get a broader perspective of gender issues.

EKEDC, Nigeria**At a glance**

Established: November 2013

Ownership: 60% private; 40% Government of Nigeria

Customers: 400,000

Total employees (2014): 2,154 (Female: 20.2%)

Country population: 186 million

Country unemployment rate: 18.8 %

Country workforce: 50% male / 50% female

Sources: Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics, *Engendering Utilities: Improving Gender Diversity in Energy Utilities*

EKEDC is one of 11 distribution companies in Nigeria, created after the unbundling and privatisation of the power sector in 2012/13. Unlike Jordan and Macedonia, where there is virtually universal electricity coverage, Nigeria's electrification rate is around 45-55%. Electricity generation does not meet current demand and there are frequent load shedding and blackout events.

Women make up around half of the labour force in Nigeria. While more than half of Nigerians are literate (57%), there are large regional variations and disparities between genders. The literacy rate for men is 69% and among women it is estimated to be 49%. Only 9% of all women are enrolled in tertiary or post-secondary education and, of those, only a small fraction are enrolled in engineering.

EKEDC's service area is in the south (Lagos state), where women enjoy more mobility and fewer cultural restrictions on employment than in the north of the country. EKEDC had the highest percentage of female employees of the seven utilities in the baseline survey (around 20%), as well as the highest percentage of female managers. It also had the lowest percentage of female engineers (slightly less than 4%). The highest numbers of women were working in customer service, finance, and HR. The baseline survey showed that few female

employees were able to take advantage of company-funded training opportunities; the number of women trained in 2014 was five, compared to 385 men.

Engendering activities and results

From 2015 to 2018, EKEDC undertook a number of activities to better understand and ameliorate gender equity gaps in its workforce and policies. These included:

- *STEM outreach:* EKEDC has launched 'energy clubs' in three junior and three senior secondary schools in Lagos. Girls were encouraged to join, and EKEDC believes that the clubs are helping to raise interest among girls in maths and engineering, as well as the energy sector.
- *Increase employment and training opportunities for women:* EKEDC has undertaken a number of initiatives to increase the recruitment and onboarding of women. These include:
 - *The Female Line Workers Employment and Training Programme:* EKEDC recruited top female graduates from the country's technical and vocational schools to participate in an internship programme. EKEDC has now hired four of these women, the first female line workers in the utility's history. It is working with the National Business and Technical Examinations Board to explore women-only courses to pre-qualify women for future line worker positions in the company.
 - *Increased training opportunities:* EKEDC received 50 scholarships from the National Power Training Institute (NAPTIN) for staff training (NAPTIN is the focal point for workforce capacity building for Nigeria's power sector). Candidates had to be nominated by department heads for training relevant to their jobs, and HR communicated it wanted gender balance in the nominations. About 62% of the final trainees were women.
 - *Revised HR practices and policies:* Aside from the equal employment opportunity policy, EKEDC has revised and/or instituted a number of new policies designed to increase gender equity, including its succession planning processes, and it renamed its Office of Manpower Planning as the Office of Workforce Planning. EKEDC has also set up a 'whistle-blower policy' and process for employees to confidentially report unethical behaviour. Several instances of sexual harassment were reported and investigated, and some staff dismissed.

Although EKEDC's total workforce was reduced nearly 15% in 2018, the percentage of female employees rose from 2014 levels, from 20.2% to 22%.

Q&A with Aikenzua Alenkhe, Chief HR Officer, EKEDC

Q: How has EKEDC's attitude toward gender equity changed over the course of the programme?

A: The CEO in place when the programme started didn't really understand what we were trying to do. Our new CEO actively supports us. That has been critical, because now middle-management has been latching on. When we hired our first female line workers, our management was excited – we are making history for the company.

Q: How do you go about changing people's perceptions that various positions need not be gender specific?

A: On-the-job training was important. Many of the men thought that women wouldn't be able to do technical field operation jobs, but the women proved they could handle all the physical requirements and now the men are okay with it. Now I want to encourage more men to apply for jobs in call centres; why should that department be all women?

My personal passion is to build a team of ethical, committed people who believe in what they do. This programme taught me the value of changing perceptions; I've been able to persuade people because of my passion. But if there's any skill that's important for my department [HR], it's change management. We are supposed to be the ambassadors, and need to anticipate the reactions of others and help them overcome their concerns.

Q: Are you setting formal targets or quotas for female hires?

A: Right now women constitute 22% of all employees, which is too low. We need to hire 65 engineers by the end of the year; I told our Managing Director my target was to have at least 45-55% women on the short list. He agreed, provided the candidates are qualified.

Q: What advice do you have for other utilities considering gender equity interventions?

A: Have an open mind about job qualifications, and showcase the benefits and advantages of diversity to the company. My management is convinced by data, and is especially interested in benchmarking data and corporate social responsibility. They believe the work we are doing is good for EKEDC's reputation.

Conclusion

While each of the three utilities profiled operates in a unique environment with specific challenges and opportunities, several commonalities can be observed across them that may be relevant for other institutions seeking to increase gender diversity and equity:

1. **Quick wins/good publicity opens the door to undertake more difficult interventions.** All of the utilities noted that the popularity with employees of *Take Your Daughter to Work Day* (which most now implement with their own resources as *Take Your Child to Work Day*) cast a positive light on the engendering programme. Management appreciated the positive media that accompanied these events, as well as outreach events to schools and Women in Energy conferences.
2. **Work-life balance issues are important to both male and female employees.** Many utilities expressed concerns about perceived cost of maternity benefits and fears that investments in women would not pay off because women might not return after childbirth. However, employee satisfaction surveys revealed that both women and men were interested in benefits such as flexitime, on-site child care, and parental leave. At least one of the seven utilities in the programme created an on-site crèche, and two added paternity leave.
3. **Virtually all of the utilities were able to find female candidates when they actually made an effort to locate and recruit them.** Partnerships with universities and vocational schools were important sources of external candidates, and internal recruitment channels were successful in finding candidates for training and promotion. While the actual numbers of women candidates may not always have been in the quantity desired, and qualifications may sometimes have been lacking, ingrained assumptions about the availability and competency of women were often proven wrong.
4. **Senior management support is key.** Utilities with significant management support, preferably from the GM/MD/CEO as well as the Chairman of the Board, were able to accomplish more than those lacking such support. Management support was critical for unleashing resources, endorsing new policies, negotiating with unions, and creating long-term institutional change.

References and further reading

Baldinger, *A Snapshot of Gender Opportunities and Constraints in the Large-Scale Electricity Sector*, Oxford Policy Management, June 2018

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About the author

Pamela Baldinger is an international development and business specialist with over 15 years of experience in the design and management of energy projects. Author of *A Snapshot of Gender Opportunities and Constraints in the Large-Scale Electricity Sector* for Oxford Policy Management, she is also the senior Gender and Social Inclusion Consultant for a Millennium Challenge Corporation project seeking to increase women's participation in the energy sector workforce in Kosovo. As Senior Energy Adviser at USAID, she managed numerous energy access, renewable energy, and gender projects. She authored the Energy Division's Gender Strategy and managed the *Empowered Entrepreneur Training Program* and the Agency's premier gender and infrastructure project *Engendering Utilities*. She served as the Agency Coordinator for the US Government's commitment to bolster adoption of clean cooking technologies in conjunction with the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, and led the development of new finance facilities and revolving funds to address energy financing constraints for consumers and energy enterprises. She has consulted for the World Bank and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and lectured at the US State Department's Foreign Service Institute.

Front cover image: Pictured (left to right) Reem Hamdan, Director Deputy General, EDCO; Aikenzua Alenkhe, Chief HR Officer, EKEDC, and Aneta Petrovska-Rusomarski, Head of HR and Organisation, EVN Macedonia in Washington DC.

Credit: Pamela Baldinger