

# Renewables are key to closing gender gap in the energy sector

By [Tamee Soudien-Witten](#)

8 Aug 2023

As a female CFO of colour at an independent power producer in the solar sector, whether I'm talking to the bank, suppliers, industry bodies or any other decision-makers, I seldom get to talk to people who look like me.



Tamee Soudien-Witten, chief finance officer, New Southern Energy. Source: Supplied

I was, however, surprised to discover though that while only 21% of the traditional energy workforce in South Africa is made up of women, renewables have reached 32% in this regard. While I suspect that a lot of this is made up at utility level, and even though we are not where we should be, we are at least inching in the right direction, albeit slowly.

Women's Day 2023 is around the corner, and while these conversations are always important, the day reminds us to elevate their priority. So, as we work to eliminate all forms of disparity and inequality in the workplace, it is appropriate to reflect on where we are as an energy industry and where we are headed here in South Africa.

## Women should lead the energy transition

From an energy perspective, South Africa currently stands on the edge of a precipice, staring into a very frightening abyss. While the cliff face is real, we also know that government needs a lifeline. The renewable energy sector represents the potential friendly face showing up and ensuring a steady walk back to safety and a brighter future.

The International Energy Agency forecasts renewable energy capacity in South Africa to expand by more than 13GW over the next five years. The public procurement of renewables is expected to contribute to over 7GW of utility-scale solar PV and more than 3GW of onshore wind projects, additional to the exponential growth being seen in the private energy sector.

Women can and should be at the front of this effort. We are the resilient plan-makers, the multi-taskers and the obstacle straddlers. Most women you meet are adept at crafting plan A, B, C and D, because life has taught us that we need to. We can apply the same agility here and it is time for industry leaders to make a concerted effort to open the door so that we manage the energy transition well.

## More modern workforce attracting young talent

Women were sidelined in the fossil fuel era with the result that the coal-based energy sector has a clunky, male-dominated historic workforce. On the other hand, renewables are on an upward growth curve. As implementers of newer, modern technology, we attract way more young talent as the youth are drawn to innovation and fresh approaches.

What's more, there is no internal friction with collective memory, as the culture of the industry is still being created. It is way easier to create industry values, standards and norms, than to reshape those that have been set over decades. How exciting to be part of creating a burgeoning new industry, where standards are still being set!



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## Alignment with personal values

The suffocation that fossil fuels are imposing on the planet have dominated headlines for years. A recent report revealed that while 70% of young Africans are concerned about climate change, less than 50% of African youth are satisfied with the effectiveness of their government's climate change policies and 64% are striving to decrease their carbon footprint.

Driven by the need to address the climate crisis, a worldwide reset of the entire energy sector is currently underway as the world lessens its dependence on traditional coal-based power and shifts towards renewable energy.

The fact that most countries in Africa are well primed to leverage solar energy with sunny climates and excellent irradiation levels provides a win-win situation. For instance, South Africa receives an average of 2,500 hours of sunshine per year. The average solar-radiation level ranges between 4.5 and 6.5kWh/m<sup>2</sup> per day, which is roughly 40% more than Central Europe.

The potential for alignment between corporate and personal values is therefore a lot stronger in the renewable space. This industry presents the chance to work towards positive change and a society where sustainable living is a reality.

## Female investors should take note

The sheer growth of the solar industry and broad adoption across so many different sectors is testimony to the fact that the

numbers work. However, access to capital has been delaying this transition in many parts of the country. Now, new financing models such as power purchasing agreements, are removing the financial barrier that previously prevented many from producing their own power and lighting the way to energy independence.

Besides the lengthy approval processes and the legislative barriers, which are fortunately being slowly lowered, financing holds the key to the future of renewable energy in South Africa. Sadly, there are very few female financiers at the table. The industry will welcome female investors and venture capitalists who are ready to enter the sector and work towards long-term returns with open arms.

The time to shape the demographic we want and need to see and to carve out the future culture of the energy industry is now.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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