

# Addressing gender diversity challenges to fast-track the growth of the renewables energy sector

By [Maureen Phiri](#)

23 Aug 2022

Although women currently account for 39% of the global labour force, representation sits at a mere 22% in the traditional energy sector and 32% in the renewable energy sector. Widely considered one of the least gender-diverse industries, the energy sector needs to urgently address challenges that hinder gender inclusion and make use of all available skills and talents to create a secure, accessible, and sustainable energy future for all.



Maureen Phiri, sales manager at Oxyon

Barriers faced by women in the energy sector are similar to those they face elsewhere in the economy. However, given the pressing need for transformation, growth, and development in the sector to meet South Africa's growing energy crisis, these challenges must be addressed. The transition to clean energy will demand innovative solutions and business models to be invented and adopted, which will necessitate enhanced participation from a diverse talent pool.

## Addressing the growing energy crisis

The energy sector is undergoing a rapid transformation, particularly in renewable energy. To address the crisis of load shedding, President Ramaphosa's renewable energy procurement programme has been urgently revived. 2,205 megawatts (MW) from Bid Window 4 have proceeded to construction. A further 6,800MW of solar PV and wind power is being procured through Bid Windows 5, 6 and 7, which will connect to the grid from late 2023 / early 2024.

Another 3,000MW of gas and 513MW of battery storage will be procured through the next bid windows and there is a pipeline of more than 70 confirmed private sector projects under development with a combined capacity of over 5,000MW, several of which will commence construction this year.

Changes have been made to the Regulations on New Generation Capacity to allow municipalities to procure power independently and several municipalities are already in the process of procuring additional power.

From an investment perspective, British International Investment plans a five-year \$6bn investment programme for Africa. This is to bolster several sectors including renewable energies and infrastructure, with a focus on supporting women-owned businesses and climate adaptation projects. In short, there is huge potential that must be maximised if we're to succeed in overcoming South Africa's load shedding crisis.



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## Addressing skills shortages

The skills needed for this type of industry growth and development are scarce. Not only in South Africa, global reports predict an impending skills gap across sectors as economies retool existing industries and explore new opportunities for job creation.

As such, there are skills shortages and a demand for additional training in almost every area of the energy sector. Skills that are increasing in demand extend to a wide range of different occupations, from engineers and architects and skilled trades to equipment operators, technicians, and construction labourers.

## Turning obstacles into opportunity

Although shortages are a challenge to labour supply, they can also be used as an opportunity to train, recruit and upskill women and other minorities that have historically been marginalised in the energy sector. Here, temporary employment services (TES) providers can start bridging the gap by matching employment opportunities in the renewable energy sector with skilled and promising women.

Given the ageing workforce, as well as the current brain drain affecting South Africa, it's unrealistic for industries to expect to continue to fish in the same male-dominated skills pool for much longer. Women are essential to accelerate the pace of a fast-growing industry such as renewable energy because they bring unique problem-solving approaches and business styles to the table.



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## Promoting awareness of the sector and diversity of occupations

From an education perspective, women are traditionally at a stark disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts.

This information imbalance includes a lack of awareness about the range of occupations, specialisations, and fields available within the energy sector. Many women simply don't know that there is more to the energy sector than just engineers, research scientists or technical installers.

If women were aware that the sector requires expertise and skills from a range of different backgrounds, such as environmental science, ecology, conservation, engineering, business management, law, public policy, and finance, to name a few, they can better visualise themselves finding a place and doing meaningful work within the energy sector.

## **Diversity now and for future generations**

There are ways to fast-track the bridging of the diversity gap. From facilitating direct access to industry insiders or building connections through mentoring to outreach presentations and visits, site tours conducted through student networks and school events, temporary employment placements and the like. This ensures that women are not only represented in the development of new skills but ensures that these skills are transferred in a useful manner that benefits the sector as a whole.

The industry itself should play a critical role here, supported by advocacy organisations, training and education sectors and TES providers. Ensuring that training and education in the energy sector is more universally accessible will enable intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral transferability, which is also a promising strategy for facilitating greater diversity for future generations.

## **Positively influencing gender diversity**

For TES providers specialising in renewable energy and the sourcing of scarce skills, the enhancement of female representation in the sector should be a top priority. By providing equal opportunities to women, TES providers are uniquely positioned to positively influence gender diversity in this space.

In addition to being able to source candidates from diverse backgrounds, TES providers are also able to provide training and skills development for women in this sector, with training solutions that are State Information Technology Agency (SITA) and Adult Education and Training (AET) accredited. This means that where time is a factor in a renewable energy project, the necessary skills can be developed before the project even begins.

## **Decisive, inclusive action is necessary**

Currently, companies in the energy sector are not doing enough to address gender diversity in their ranks. It's not enough to participate in roundtable discussions on gender inclusion. It's not enough to just talk. Organisations need to act.

Gender mainstreaming needs to become the order of the day. An approach that facilitates equality in the workplace, while at the same time acknowledging and leveraging the differences between men and women, gender mainstreaming focuses on creating policies and positions within a working environment that is properly equipped to be inclusive. It highlights and creates spaces in which women can showcase their talents in a way that does not perpetuate the existing inequalities or stereotypes.

Gender mainstreaming is important because equality is not about treating everyone in the same way, but it recognises that individual needs are sometimes best met in different ways.

Only by addressing gender mainstreaming as a matter of urgency and making the energy sector accessible for all genders will it be possible to find and tap into the skills, resources, and innovation necessary to solve South Africa's load shedding crisis and facilitate the necessary transition to cleaner energy.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Maureen Phiri, sales manager at Oxyon

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