

# Making solar more representative



**CSR |** As increased emphasis is placed on diversity society-wide, Alice Grundy takes a look at efforts from across the solar sector to increase diversity within its ranks.

Credit: Lightsource BP

It is perhaps surprising to very few to say that diversity has not always been a focus of the solar industry, having historically been largely made up of white men, as is the case for many sectors that by their very nature dabble in the also largely male engineering and finance industries.

However, whether this is still the case in the sector is not so clear cut, particularly as huge pushes for improvements to gender, race, sexuality, economic background and religious representation are made in society as a whole. Whilst many of these movements are largely

calling for wider societal reforms, private companies are not exempt from being held to higher standards. With solar helping the charge towards a better, carbon-free world, how much does the sector reflect this modern world it is attempting to build?

No industry has a perfect track record when it comes to diversity and the solar sector is no different. Whilst it does have its fair share of successes to be celebrated, it certainly isn't squeaky clean either. Several high-profile discrimination cases have made their way to the courts and if taken in isolation, could certainly paint

## Encouraging more women in engineering should start in schools.

a very specific picture of solar and its attitudes towards certain underrepresented demographics.

In 2019, a class-action lawsuit was brought against US-based Momentum Solar on behalf of six black former employees, with this lawsuit alleging black workers were paid less, assigned "less desirable jobs" and in certain cases fired when complaining of discrimination to managers. This was heavily disputed by Momentum Solar at the time, with the company stating the claims had "no basis in law and fact".

It wasn't the only case to hit the

headlines of alleged racism in the solar sector. A year prior a separate lawsuit was brought against Vivint Solar which stated that a black employee was subject to racist remarks, while further allegations claimed a cardboard fort had been constructed that was spray-painted with the words “white only”. In a statement released at the time of the claims, Vivint Solar’s chief executive David Bywater was quick to assure that the company has a “zero-tolerance policy for racial discrimination and harassment in the workplace”, with Vivint being built “on the strength of diversity”. One employee was dismissed as a result of the case.

Whilst these are perhaps the two most well-known alleged instances of discrimination in the solar sector, they are not the only ones to surface. In November 2019, allegations came to light against Tesla, with six former employees of its upstate New York solar cell and module factory filing racism and discrimination complaints with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And in January 2020, US-based solar installer Fidelity Home Energy – and its successor NorCal Home Systems – agreed to pay \$350,000 to a former employee and hire a consultant to resolve a discrimination lawsuit.

In the wake of these cases, the solar industry has stressed the need for greater diversity in its ranks, the aim being to perforate perceived glass ceilings and make the sector more representative. Indeed, many solar companies are now actively searching for diverse talent and recognising the benefits of this. Chief among these benefits is more nuanced decision making, with many different ideas and ways of thinking converging in one room resulting in better, more well-informed ideas.

“It creates an environment where the way you make decisions is richer,” Kareen Boutonnat, CEO of Lightsource BP International and Europe says, adding that “it creates a different perspective”. However, having many different people thinking in many different directions can also create challenges in return when it comes to managing these varying ideas. Whilst this can be difficult, Boutonnat says she’d “rather have the issue of managing that type of thinking outside of the box” than have the opposite issue of everyone in a team thinking the same way to the point of being able to finish each other’s sentences.

The benefits also vary depending on which demographic is looked at. When it comes to increasing the number of women in the sector specifically, Sonya Bedford, partner at UK solicitors Stephens Scown where she heads up the renewable energy team as well as being a non-executive director of energy trade body Regen, suggests that there are certain aspects where on average women perform better, stating “we’ve certainly seen better results when it comes to communication”. She adds that there are “a lot of very, very clever women” and that anyone regardless of gender should “be able to come forward and deliver the projects and be on the frontline of the energy revolution”.

This recognition of the benefits comes as many solar firms are celebrating the levels of diversity achieved within its staff, with Boutonnat describing the over 30 nationalities working in Lightsource BP’s London office as being “quite an achievement” and something that has created “who we are and a DNA that’s very rich as a result”. This is also true of other firms operating in the solar sector, such as investor NextEnergy Capital.

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Giulia Guidi, head of ESG, describes the company as having a “very open and diverse culture” with around 22 different nationalities across around 190 employees.

However, the question as to whether the sector is as welcoming and easy to succeed in for women as it is for men is not easily answered. Guidi says that despite the solar sector being “vibrant and exciting”, there are times when she had to work harder as a woman, although this was largely in relation to learning to ask for support and “also the art of delegation”. The real challenge is in “managing your personal and professional lives in a balanced way,” Guidi says, adding this is true regardless of your gender.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Akinkugbe, project team manager for construction operations at US solar and battery

storage firm Sunnova, says that it is “hard work and determination” that has opened many doors for her. When it comes to being a woman in the solar sector, she says that can be intimidating at times but that her parents raised her to “never limit myself or be afraid of what I can accomplish because of my gender or race”.

### **The convergence of engineering and finance**

The experiences of women in the sector can vary depending on a number of things. Boutonnat explains that when compared to industries such as the tech industry – where her background lies – solar is “not a cutthroat environment”. In fact, renewables has been “refreshing”, with women being “very well represented in renewables”.

This is in spite of the fact solar has historically been saturated with white men, something which could be due to it being at its core a convergence of engineering and finance – with both these sectors being “generally more attractive to men” as Guidi says. Therefore as the industry came to be, those with experience in the necessary sectors moved over into solar, bringing with them similar levels of diversity.

The convergence of finance and engineering in the sector “has certainly played a role” in solar being historically male and white, according to Abigail Ross Hopper, president and CEO of the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA), while Bedford adds that there has been “less visible women who are doing the engineering side”, with this having never been seen as “roles that women were getting into”.

Visibility is an important factor in increasing diversity, allowing the younger generations to see examples of people like them in the jobs they aspire to one day have, showing it is something that can in fact be achieved. As Akinkugbe explains: “Highlighting the current women and their positions will bring more awareness of how many women are actually in this sector and how many are joining every day”.

### **A diverse sector for a modern agenda**

So the times- are they a’changing? These things are perhaps a little hard to quantify in any truly meaningful way (short of rounding up every single employee in

the solar sector for one survey). When looking at the US specifically, research from the SEIA released in its 2019 US Solar Industry Diversity Study shows that despite some of the improvements cited above, there are still some aspects of the industry where there are not quite equal opportunities.

Its survey – which had responses from 377 solar firms and 398 employees – found that when it comes to the manager, director, president (MDP) level men are more likely to hold these positions than women, with 37% of men holding these positions comparing to 28% of women. When the MDP level is broken down to include only executive-level positions, the average firm reported its senior executives are in fact all white men. Among all senior executives reported by solar firms, 88% are white and 80% are men, the report found. Hopper says that when she joined the SEIA in 2017, she was “taken aback by the lack of representation in our industry” and has ever since then made diversity and inclusion “a top priority”.

Whilst the report found certain discrepancies showing a need for further diversity in the sector, it also found that when it comes to the LGBTQA+ community, the solar industry seems to have “generally adopted an inclusive and welcoming environment”. It detailed how 39% of LGBTQA+ people hold MDP-level positions, a figure higher than the overall percentage of respondents that hold those positions, and 61% hold mid-level positions.

Anecdotal evidence does seem to support the idea that some progress in increasing levels of diversity has certainly been made, suggesting that a combination of a greater awareness of the importance of having diverse teams within companies alongside initiatives outside of the sector itself – largely an increased focus on pushing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and careers in schools – has in part been responsible for this.

Giving the example of being one of only two women when she studied for her Masters degree six years ago, Bedford says this is something that is indeed changing and there now are “more women engineers coming through”. The industry is moving towards a “much more level playing field”, she continues, although with the caveat that it’s “still not balanced by a longshot”.

### Improving diversity: Where to go from here

Whilst the improvements made are certainly something to be celebrated, it is also important for the industry to not rest on its laurels. There is always more to be done, with a number of ways to encourage greater diversity in the sector. Boutonnat suggests that one way to do this is doing more “early on in the process at schools” and spending more time speaking to and educating students.

This emphasis on schools and education is echoed by Guidi, who said that encouragement “starts from school and from us as individuals and families”.

### “Diverse workers are out there and it’s on us to expand our hiring pool and find them”

with the first step to encouraging more women into the sector being to let young girls “try and explore different things, ensuring that they grow as they want to grow without prejudice”. Other ways to improve diversity include increasing awareness throughout the educational journey, with schools and universities needing to offer more courses on both solar and renewable energy as a whole.

However, measures such as education and internships are not the only solution, with Hopper warning against viewing internship programmes as a silver bullet despite claiming them to be useful for creating a pipeline of talent. She points to how it can be difficult to be ‘the first’ or ‘the only’ at a company, suggesting that to retain diverse talent is equally important to “think about a diverse worker’s experience at your company and how your culture can either contribute to or inhibit their success”.

Measures such as mentorship programmes also play a significant role in encouraging women both into the solar sector and into higher positions. Akinkugbe points to how she has a “great group of mentors” and is encouraged to enrol on any leadership courses or skill development classes she wants to take. “They allow me to try new things and sit in on some meetings that they believe will help me develop a stronger skill set and grow individually,” she says.

Meanwhile, sector-wide initiatives

such as the Entrepreneurial Women in Renewable Energy (EWIRE) mentoring programme – set up by UK-based trade body Regen – have been created to encourage women in the clean energy industry to progress their careers by matching them with both senior women and men across the sector.

According to the SEIA’s report, over half of women indicated that professional connections and networking are vital to their successful career navigation compared to only 30% of men.

Additionally, Bedford says that some of the best networking she’s experienced has come from women groups, with there being more of an “openness and willingness to talk about issues” without the “bravado that used to come in the solar industry”.

These measures should come alongside ones such as ensuring those that are hiring do so fairly, with Hopper detailing how unconscious bias training – with some employers discounting candidates because of unconscious bias about their race, gender, sexuality etc – is “critically important for anyone in a hiring or managerial position”.

It will be action across the industry, however, that results in higher levels of diversity. It is not the responsibility of one company or trade body to implement change that will create a truly diverse sector, although the benefits to the organisations leading the way when it comes to diversity in setting an example can’t be underestimated. It is, however, systematic change, such as that being called for throughout society, that will make the biggest difference in this journey.

Whilst this does seem like a tall order, there are clear signs from companies and trade bodies alike that the drive, willingness and ability to continue to diversify the workforce and create an industry that is better for its inclusivity is indeed present. There have been great steps forward, and while there is still more to do, the work ahead is perhaps not insurmountable. Mentorships, training and open minds will continue to boost the diversity and as a result create a richer and better sector. Most importantly, continuing to make diverse hires and listening to the voices of those underrepresented in the sector will be key. As Hopper explains: “Diverse workers are out there and it’s on us to expand our hiring pool and find them”.