

# Levelling the field: How solar is tackling gender diversity



Credit: Nextacker

**Equality** | Women still make up just 32% of the renewables workforce worldwide, but initiatives are emerging with the aim of improving gender diversity at all levels. Molly Lempriere takes a look at the current state of play, and how companies are looking to attract a more gender diverse workforce.

The benefits of gender diversity are well documented, and throughout the solar sector companies are increasingly looking to capitalise on these. Initiatives that highlight the opportunities within the renewables sector to school and university pupils, mentorship programs and diversity recognition initiatives are emerging, but what else can companies do to attract – and keep – women in the solar sector?

In the renewable energy sector globally, those identifying as a woman make up around 32% of the workforce according to a 2019 report from the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). While this is higher than the energy sector at large – where it sits at 22% – there remain a number of key discrepancies. The share of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) related positions sits at just 28%, for example, while they make up 45% of administrative positions.

For the solar sector more specifically, the same gap rings true. In the US, women represented just 26% of the solar workforce in 2019, according to research from the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA). This discrepancy is even worse at the top of organisations, with just 28% of that figure holding manager, director, or president-level positions. This has ramifications in a number of ways. Economically, women make 74 cents on the dollar compared to men in the solar sector in the US. For women of colour, the disparity is even starker.

## The barriers to entry

There are barriers to both entry and progression for women in the solar sector, with one of the first stumbling blocks being a lack of women and girls entering STEM subjects. This is a global trend, for

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**Efforts are afoot to encourage more women to take up positions in the renewables sector.**

example in New Zealand, in health related studies women make up 80% of graduates, but less than 30% of engineering, IRENA said.

"There's still the perception that all energy sector jobs are very technical," says Christine Lins, co-founder and executive director of Global Women's Network for the Energy Transition (GWNET).

"On the one hand, I think we need to work on attracting more women and girls to STEM subjects. But we also really put an emphasis on the fact that this sector does not only have technical jobs, but also needs political scientists, marketing people, all different kinds of professions. It's a very versatile subject."

When women do start working in the sector, they often find it hard to progress, held back by a number of factors including the work culture and a lack of role models. In a series of interviews conducted by GWNET for its report *'Women for Sustainable Energy: Strategies to Foster Women's Talent for Transformational Change'*, the existence of a "boys club" culture – often brought from the conventional energy sector into the renewables sector – was described as creating unfavourable conditions for women as employees.

A survey by the Brazilian Women's Network in Solar Energy in 2019 found that 62% of women surveyed had heard sexist comments in a predominantly male work environment, while around half of the 130 respondents said that they had suffered some kind of gender discrimination within the solar sector.

However, awareness of the problem – or lack thereof – is also a barrier. IRENA found that only 40% of men perceive the existence of gender related barriers, in comparison with 75% of women. Similarly, 60% of men believe that genders are paid equally in comparison to just 29% of women. If the gap is not perceived it cannot be tackled, particularly if men still dominate the decision making positions.



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**GWNET hosts events throughout the year designed to advance gender equality in the renewables sector.**

### Tackling gender inequality at the root: improving STEM

Greater equality in STEM subjects at school and university must be one of the first targets for initiatives to increase gender diversity. Companies in the solar sector can support this by reaching out and working with schools and universities.

Additionally, companies should work to “showcase the full range of opportunities that a career in solar can provide”, says Rachel Hayes, policy analyst at trade association Solar Energy UK.

“I have also found it interesting to break down the perception barrier that to work in the renewables industry you have to be ‘clever’. I think the word clever can take many forms, but in the engagement I have had, this has often been raised with young women who may have learning difficulties or find academia challenging... As someone with dyslexia myself, I can relate to this. [But] a career in solar has no set pathway, there are both vocational and academic routes into the industry – roles for everyone!”

Beyond this, companies can support greater gender diversity by establishing paid internship programs, scholarships

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and training and apprenticeship programs, which can attract new people to the industry.

“It’s really important to offer the access opportunities to under-represented groups; by offering the first step, the first role, we are giving people a chance to develop they otherwise might not have had and are equipping them to go forwards in their careers from a foundation of meaningful work experience. It is important to widen the ‘access’ funnel as early as possible, to address gender balance in a sustainable way,” says Axel Thiemann, CEO of Sonnedix.

Following on from providing these first steps, companies should examine every step of their talent acquisition process, from training hiring managers, to using software to check the language used in job adverts, having gender-balanced shortlists and a diverse interview process.

Setting gender diversity targets and quotas like the Equal by 30 Campaign, which calls on companies to commit to equal pay, equal leadership and equal opportunities for women by 2030, can also help foster progress.

### Providing clear, supported pathways to progress

Policy and regulation can also be utilised to support women once they are working in the sector. This includes focusing on creating an inclusive work environment, retaining such staff members and setting out clear career pathways, says Jen Bristol, senior director of communications at SEIA.

“In addition, recognition and mentorship can be powerful tools and help women, people of colour, and other represented groups excel,” she says.

Putting in place strong anti-discrimination policies, bringing a gender perspective into the decision making process, enforcing equal pay and adequate paid parental leave policies, can all help improve a company’s culture. Mentorship programs are becoming an increasingly common way to retain and support women in the solar sector. “Women sometimes lack a bit of confidence, we can really see the benefits of providing the motivation to climb the career ladder, one step further, through mentorship,” says Lins.

According to the *Women in the Workplace* study from McKinsey in 2018, women made up 48% of the entry-level workforce in the US, but just 23% of those at C-suite level, a proportion which decreases at each level. For women of colour, this disparity is even more stark, making up 17% of the entry-level workforce but just 4% of leadership positions.

Implementing clear pathways for progression and supporting women to take them through mentorship and strong cultural policies can help tackle this gap. To help recognise the efforts of companies in the solar sector that are introducing such policies, and therefore encourage further best practice, SEIA launched its Diversity Equity Inclusion and Justice (DEIJ) Certification Program in October 2021.

“Many companies are looking to improve their diversity business practices but didn’t have the resources to implement practices on their own,” says Bristol. “Through the diversity certification program, companies now have a clear

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path to make tangible improvements to their business practices,” she says, indicating that more than two dozen companies have enrolled in the programme to date.

While undoubtedly progress is being made, the gender gap in the solar sector remains pronounced. Companies should look to best practice guides and success stories to begin working towards gender balance in their organisations now, but with the highest discrepancy remaining at the C-suite level, it will undoubtedly be a work in progress for years to come. ■