

The Women in Energy series is a joint project between USEA and USAID that was developed out of USEA's Engendering Utilities Partnership, a program funded by USAID to improve gender policies and gender outcomes at their respective organizations.



Every month we feature a woman who has shown exemplary leadership. We want to showcase your story this month. The women among you come from diverse backgrounds and roles, and they bring with them a unique perspective to gender equality within the energy sector.

Women in Energy Interview Questions

1. How have your education and career path led you to where you are now?

I studied in German schools in Brazil where I was taught how to argue in the written form (and in several languages), an asset that has been really important in my professional life and which is a skill that unfortunately is still underestimated in the education of children and teenagers in several countries. I decided to study Economics when I was 17 because I had read in a magazine about a generation of young millionaires in Brazil which had become rich before their thirties and the thing they had in common was their studies in Economics that had led them to the financial market. Then inadvertently, but luckily, I ended up in a university which was more reputed for its research in industrial economics, including energy economics, than in finance. And it was love at the first sight. So, I read, wrote, studied, worked with and breathed energy since I was 18 years old. I continued my studies in the field with a Master of Science in Energy. And I always had this idea that if you wanted to work as an economist you should work for a bank or in the government, so my first relevant professional experience was as a trainee at a Brazilian bank, working with project finance for the energy industry. But it did not last long because the bank experienced an intervention and shortly after I was looking for something else to do. And this is when I got the opportunity in 2005 to work as an economist for the Brazilian Federal Government due to an invitation to join the Economic Advisory Office Team of the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME). I was 25 years old when I started advising ministers in this field. So, I may say that I have been lucky, but also hard working, contributing to all strategic public policies and programs for the energy sector in Brazil for at least for 16 years now. In the Ministry of Mines and Energy I have had the opportunity to hold several positions and now I am the Head of the Regulatory Advisory Office. My main duty at the moment is the coordination of the power sector reform, called the Modernization of the Power Sector.

There is yet another area of education in which I ended up delving into unpretentiously, but which has had a great influence on the professional and person I've become. The Brazilian School of Public Administration (ENAP) offers leadership training programs for public servants and in 2015 I had the opportunity to take part in a female leadership program which really changed the way I viewed my career and future perspectives. Shortly after that I had the privilege to participate in an executive program at The Harvard Kennedy School, the "Women and Power: Leadership in a New World". This changed my whole idea of purpose and about the kind of leadership a woman can and should perform. So, I obviously started to study more about gender and inclusion, but I see this more as enabling instruments to understand and address career and leadership from the perspective of women. This is what led me to create with a colleague of mine a project called "Yes, they exist" (#simelasexistem), firstly aimed to list and highlight the large number of very competent and available female professionals in the energy industry, inside the context of a presidential election and subsequent new administration.

2. Over the course of your career, have you witnessed changes in the sector that have launched more women into leadership positions?

Yes, for sure. But I must be honest that this was not something that I (and several other female sectorial colleagues of mine) really noticed about the sector at first. It was what it was, a very male dominated space where competent men and women were appreciated but where men occupied most of the leadership positions, maybe because they just had been there for so long. But then I have witnessed an increasingly greater number of female professionals growing up with the sector so that, nowadays it calls more attention if only men move forward in their careers when a large talent pool of women is as well-equipped as their male colleagues. So, since the #simelasexistem, this unequal unconscious behavior is more openly discussed and avoided, not only by women but also by men in the Brazilian energy sector. And we have been witnessing a lot of progress in recent years, in terms of women who have reached the C-Suite or promoted to leadership positions in governments for example, and maybe this is still not very significant in terms of relative participation, but I see an increase in the pace these transformations are happening. But, obviously, there is still room for improvement.

3. Technology is transforming the traditional utility business model into a more modern interactive grid. Some utilities view this transformation as an opportunity to focus on change management and diversity. Research provides compelling evidence that inclusion and diversity unlock innovation and drives better business performance. What, if anything, is your organization doing to attract, retain, and promote more women into senior management positions to respond to the dramatic industry transformation?

I work at the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME) and there are three things that I would highlight that are being done for those purposes. The first thing is: we have had a greater number of female professionals nominated to leadership positions not only in the Ministry but also in the 18 agencies and state-controlled companies linked to the Ministry in recent years.

The deputy energy minister today is a woman, the first one in more than 60 years of existence of this institution. It is very important for other women, especially the younger ones, to have examples to follow. And a larger number of women occupying these positions is also important to create a safe space, a space of belonging, where women feel free to talk about the challenges they face, to speak up, and to support each other.

And the second thing that my organization has had for more than 14 years is a gender and inclusion committee, which luckily has a large impact because it also congregates the gender and inclusion committees of the 18 agencies and state-controlled companies linked to the Ministry. This committee is also a space where these issues are addressed and where awareness is risen.

Last but not least, one important thing that helps to retain our female talents is that women participate in different professionally challenging tasks in the Ministry and this is also due to our small team and the large amount of responsibilities that we have, so we have to employ all of our talents. I would say that at the MME there is no shortage of interesting things to do if you are willing to embrace challenges and responsibilities, and what we are trying to create through examples, as mentioned before, is a safe space where women may aspire to grow and feel free to demonstrate their ambitions and to speak up for what they know and believe.

4. Are talented women within your organization making it to top leadership positions? Why/why not?

Yes they are, more than ever before. We are still a minority, but we must also recognize that women are still a minority group at the entry level too. And this has to do with the industry itself that at its origin was more related to STEM careers which still attract less women than men. The good thing is that as the industry is changing with the digitalization of the economy and the new framing of energy as a service, the academic backgrounds needed in the industry are also changing and becoming diversified. We have nowadays many more lawyers, economists, journalists, and professionals from the social sciences in the industry, which attract much more women.

And why do I think these women are making it to top leadership positions? Because I think we started VIEWING these women as natural candidates to these positions THE SAME WAY as their male colleagues, something that did not happen before. And the more women we see occupying these positions the more natural it will be to think of other women to fulfill them in the future: it is really about rectifying an unconscious bias.

5. Companies that embrace diversity outperform their competitors. What type of diversity programs does your organization have in place to mentor future women leaders? How does your organization measure and report gender diversity? Is the data publicly available?

The MME is not very big in terms of its own cadre of public servants. We have about 600 employees and many of them do not even belong to the Ministry (they may come from other ministries, state-controlled companies or under temporary hiring), and outperforming competitors is not something that really applies to our activities. But when we look into the other agencies and state-controlled companies linked to the Ministry, this changes a lot. Two examples are two public listed companies: Petrobras and Eletrobras. Petrobras recently launched a mentoring program for its female professionals. These companies and the others linked to the MME as well as the Regulatory Agencies, as mentioned, work together through their gender and inclusion committees and ours, called COGEMMEV. Together they have been working on a strategic plan that aims at establishing measurable targets in specific areas such as communication, capacity building and relationship with stakeholders. They are also working together in collecting data about gender diversity, as some of these entities have these numbers publicly available and others don't.

But what I think is worthy of mention is that because women are still an absolute minority in the energy sector, so they are spread all over, what we have been witnessing are mentoring initiatives for women that are taking place in cross-sectorial institutions or movements. I give two examples: the first one is the mentoring initiative for women promoted by the Brazilian Petroleum, Gas and Biofuels Institute (IBP, in Portuguese) focusing on women of several oil and gas companies. And the second initiative is a mentoring program focusing on young female professionals entering the energy industry called Empodere-C (Empower Yourself) of which I am one of the creators through #simelasexistem, together with FGV Energia (a think tank) and Energy C (a platform of young professionals of the Brazilian energy sector). We have just selected the 20 participants of the program which will start this February and last about a year. All of us, promoters of the program, but also all the mentors (experienced female energy professionals) and all the other professionals which will participate in the webinars about soft skills and about the sharing of life experiences are doing it on a voluntary basis. And the whole content that we will create through the webinars is going to be publicly available because our intention is to spread consciousness and knowledge about career from women's perspectives.

6. What actions should the energy and electricity sector be focused on to accelerate change, increase diversity, and foster a better gender balance in the boardroom?

My career at the Ministry and all the knowledge and experience that I've gathered there enabled me to participate as a board member at several state-controlled companies linked to the MME and participating into the corporate world through these boards is one of the most fascinating parts of my duties. It is really a huge responsibility and you have to add it on top of all the work you already have and be prepared for the meetings along with your other daily tasks and duties. So, it is really a relief for me when I am sitting on a diversified board, and I am not talking about gender only, but especially about competences, experiences and academic backgrounds. Because this is when I am more sure that nothing will escape from our scrutiny,

when everyone, according to his or her abilities and skills, does his or her best related to what they know more about.

That being said, I think there are two things the energy and electricity sector can do about it: one is very similar to the original idea of the #simelasystem: to keep an updated list of competent female energy professionals that would be eligible for these positions because since these women are still a minority it might be sometimes hard to find them, but yes, they do exist! The other one would build up on other existing initiatives focused on capacity building for women that want to become board members. Specific technical content about the energy and power industries could be added to these programs so that more women and then maybe with more different backgrounds could become eligible for these positions.

But I must express that my impression is that shareholders are those who have a greater interest in the board diversity, and that shareholders in the energy and power companies are usually not sector specific, so my point is that this mindset and preoccupation should be economy-wide. If the sector has been provided with a list of prospective female board members, with the needed specific knowledge about the industry, I think this would make the lives of these shareholders much easier, wouldn't it?