

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 believe that having a well-rounded education is a major contributor to my professional success. After obtaining my Bachelors in Science from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, I continued to pursue postgraduate degrees in General Management and also in Economics Development from Sri Lankan universities. Later, I obtained a Masters degree in Project Management from the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia.

Joining the Sri Lanka Civil Service allowed me to work in managerial positions in many Ministries that include Finance, Defence, Foreign Affairs, S&T, Health and, Power & Energy. It enhanced my knowledge in many different subjects. I have held positions in national, divisional and grassroots level within Sri Lanka. Also, I had the opportunity of serving the country as a Sri Lankan diplomat in Washington DC and, working for the United Nations Development Programme as a National Project Coordinator. As such, working with the public sector, private sector, international organizations and Non-governmental Organizations, helped me to see subjects/ issues in different perspectives and understand different stakeholder perceptions which in turn helped me to make effective decisions that are accepted and admired by many.

All of the above may have helped me to reach where I am today. However, in addition to above, I believe that, my experience as a normal citizen, friend, sister, daughter and mother has shaped my perspectives and decision making on many levels.”

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

“Over the course of my career, which spans almost three decades, I have witnessed more and more women taking leadership responsibilities in all sectors including the power and energy sectors. This is not a new trend as its roots go back to the to the ancient days where women were even deemed to be fit enough to reign the country. In fact, in recent times under a democratic set up we produced the first ever female Prime Minister of the world illustrating the general attitude of the country towards women.

I am happy to note that we have achieved a significant progress in respect to women's rights in Sri Lanka. Specifically, following the International Women's Year in 1975 and the United Nations Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985, a number of policies and laws were enacted to enhance the rights of women in the Sri Lankan government. In 1981, the Convention on the “Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” is adopted by the United Nations where Sri Lanka became a signatory, and Sri Lanka’s Constitution recognizes the right to equality and the principle of non-discrimination and provides for a breach by executive or administrative action to be challenged in the Supreme Court, which is the highest Court in the land. It says that, "No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such grounds". Therefore, the supreme law of the land not only recognizes the right to equality but also provides for effective enforcement. This provision and the several regulations within the public service which incorporate good governance principles into matters such as recruitment and promotion and, ensure that women are afforded equal opportunities to rise to the highest ranks without discrimination.

In modern Sri Lanka, success of women in their professional lives can mainly be attributed to the free education system we have been enjoying since 1945. Consequently, the latter part of the last century witnessed more and more educated women being available to take up important positions in the state sector. Many women engineers and managers who recruited to middle level positions were able to reach top positions. Equal acceptance of women and men for higher positions is a result of the attitude of the general public towards the women reinforced by the recent policies and laws enacted by the State to protect rights of women.

The present-day society of Sri Lanka give equal value to ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ in the families. In Sri Lanka, the secondary school education is mandatory up to 14 years of age. Further, ours is a country where not only primary and secondary education but even university education is provided for free of charge. As such, the education is something that is accessible to all equally and hence education is not a barrier for any gender in climbing the professional ladder.

However, when the State sector is concerned, noticeably, the women representation in key positions is now becoming stabilized within many sectors. This has now grown to the extent that the dominancy in certain professions such as Sri Lanka Civil /Administrative Service, Foreign

Service, Medical Service etc. are now being held by women. Therefore, the circumstances have changed much in the recent past that people don't feel that women are missed. One reason for this development being, more girls getting into higher studies than boys.

In order to successfully navigate the industry transformation, the organizations and specially their leaders have to be professional, futuristic, innovative and yet humane. As such, to achieve a sustainable development within the business, the leaders should have approaches such as hierarchy, competitiveness, goal-orientedness, command etc. (that are considered as masculine approaches), as well as the 'so called' feminine approaches such as collaborative, cooperative, methodical, compromising, empathetic and considerate. This will unavoidably be achieved through a well equilibrated staff and hence a more fitting outcome can be achieved through a diversified Board Room."

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?

"Sri Lanka has electrified the entire nation. By this level of penetration of the electric connectivity to the society we have created a massive social engine that can create unimaginable growth momentum and, that we have to use for the national development in a productive way.

If we consider the future, our transportation is bound to go electric and our metropolitan railways will be converted to electric in the forthcoming years. The Colombo metropolis will be interconnected with a matrix of Light Rail Transit system. Our domestic loads are expected to see a two-fold growth within the forthcoming years due to the proliferation into heating and cooling. Our industries are expected to grow into the IT sector adding harmonic ridden power electronic loads at our distribution network.

In addition, our zero-power outage tolerant customers in the future are going to install own grid connected energy storage systems and will expect us to provide grid support to them. They will expect to provide us grid services in return. Our distribution utilities will be compelled to proliferate their business model to provide reliable services, dynamic load control services and demand response services to the transmission operator.

With all these developments, we should be prepared to cater to this growing demand for power supply and face the challenges successfully. As such, the traditional management styles will not be suitable anymore to face this challenge. It has to be modernized and developed business

models have to be applied. Inclusion and diversity unlock innovation will drive better business performance.

Inescapably, innovations and inventions are a must that we should encourage to face this industry transformation. The key to unlock the potential of our sector in the outset of this disruption is inclusiveness induced growth and diversity induced innovation.

Entering women into senior management positions in the State sector is merely a level playing field. From the recruitment to the retirement, it is mostly the individual capability that drives them for promotions, as it is not gender biased. Moreover, the equality provisions in the Constitution provide for equal opportunities and no special features are considered necessary.

Women professionals including engineers and managers recruited at middle level have the prospect of being reaching higher positions if they retained in the service. In the past, very often they missed this opportunity as they have to leave the active service, giving priority to family commitments. However, today this situation has dramatically changed due to benefits such as extended maternity leave and other facilities granted to women persuading them to retain in the service. This has paved the way for them continue their career allowing them to reach top positions if they deserve to hold such positions.

In addition, ensuring equal benefits, offering fair working conditions and implementing zero tolerance policies for workplace harassment are some essential steps that need to be taken to attract and retain more women across all industries/ sectors.”

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

“Thankfully yes. There is a considerable percentage of women holding high positions in Power and Energy sector in Sri Lanka.

It is worth mentioning that we had a lady Minister leading the Power & Energy Ministry in the recent past and, the topmost management position of the Sri Lanka Electricity Board was recently held by a competent woman engineer until her retirement.

Promotional prospects in all or many parts of the public sector does not matter with gender. It is mostly the maturity, capacity and capability that takes a person forward. Even in the private sector, I am happy to note that there are leading Sri Lankan private sector companies that encourage more women in leadership positions and those who perform well are recognized for promotions irrespective of gender. Such companies - that are exemplary to others – have found harnessed better work culture and better bondage to the organization than others.”

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 question of gender diversity has addressed by itself due to the State sector being sufficiently represented by women over the times. Presumably in future there will be more key positions held by women. As the question is inoperative, the reporting and corrective action protocols are not in place within the State sector.”

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?

“The Energy and electricity sector are growing fast with increased diversity. The industry includes many Institutions / actors outside the State sector. This thick slice of the industry comprising of suppliers, contractors and secondary service providers. The sector wellbeing and its sustainability is dependent on the competitiveness and the innovativeness of these partners to cope up with the industry demands and therefore, should focus its efforts on continuous improvements in all partners to face the industry transformation. Accordingly, the management styles also have to be modernized and developed business models have to be applied.

Through the positions that I’ve held in the public sector I have seen how gender diversity helps to strengthen the organization and its services. It creates value for public clients in a more acceptable and appropriate way. It enables and enhances collective and inclusive decision-making.

When energy and electricity sectors are concerned, we have achieved the gender balance at high level positions within our directly controlled organizations to an appreciable level. I think it is high time that we focus on these values and norms to be popularized among our suppliers, contractors and service providers as well. We can do this through our procurement policies, project evaluation strategies as well as our social safeguard strategies.

However, as a general concern if we go by the numbers, the policy making bodies of the public sector of Sri Lanka, which are the Cabinet of Ministers and the Parliament is poorly represented by women and, I am happy to note that the efforts are being taken by the Government to improve women representation in politics.”