

Women in power need a thick skin and a good sense of humour

Zelda Weitz, chief operations officer (COO) of [Symbion Power](#), still has a good laugh every now and then when she walks into a meeting and people assume she is either the CEO's PA or "the marketing lady".



Image source: Getty/Gallo

She has lived, worked and travelled in 29 countries in Africa and says while things are changing, there is still a certain perception of roles that women are expected to perform in the sector: "I was once at a project meeting where the client asked me to take the notes, because I was the only female present. He blushed afterwards when I gave him my business card. You develop a thick skin and maintain a good sense of humour. That said, I am not scared to make coffee for my colleagues and most of the time at meetings you will find the females taking minutes or arranging the logistics alongside their real day jobs. Women really are good with attention to details and are very good at adapting in challenging environments."

She adds: "it is, however, a nice challenge to be in the sector and in Symbion specifically, women are given many opportunities to grow. Our country manager in Madagascar is a female and we have a lady in our control room at the Mandrozeza power plant in Tana. In Kenya our team is 50% female, to mention but a couple of examples. I remember the days of visiting our construction sites in remote locations and the guys being surprised that I visited those sites that the construction directors did not bother to visit. I do see more female engineers, technicians and managers in the sector and at events nowadays. Things are changing." [Read full interview here.](#)

Breaking new ground

Sindi Mzamo, director at [Divaine Growth Solutions](#), says "my journey started as a COO and head of marketing of the Edison Power Group and I was the first and only woman among the five directors on the board. My vision has always been to break new ground for South Africa's black people, particularly women in the business and economic arenas particularly in the energy sector.

"Divaine Growth Solutions is currently running an 18-month Female Development Programme focusing on emancipation and empowerment of women-owned businesses within the energy sector. The vision for the programme is to provide needed support to these SMEs from industry-related information, access to market, access to financial information, network and possible venture opportunities. I think having a programme like this will not only encourage the current women

in the sector but will also attract the upcoming young women leaders to pursue careers within the energy space.”

Not so much an issue anymore

Penny Herbst, Strategy Director at [Africa GreenCo](#) and a 30-year veteran of the energy industry says that based on her experience at Eskom: “women have been making a contribution in the utility environment across various disciplines for quite some time and I think it has got to a point, especially from the utility’s point of view that it is not so much of an issue anymore.”

She continues: “I am not sure I can say as much for the private sector especially as it pertains to my across-discipline remark, but I stand to be corrected. However, from a visibility point of view it still seems to be a man’s world. I would like to qualify this statement in one respect, I see far more women being entrepreneurial in the energy space and starting businesses as opposed to there being a real visible change in the energy corporate / IPP space. Progress has to include mechanisms to measure and monitor sustainability and further define what exactly is meant by gender parity and remuneration thereof. Regarding my remark re the private sector, perhaps I will be proved wrong.”

Diverse status quo

“Gender diversity is a no-brainer,” says Miriam Mannak, a freelance energy correspondent and event ambassador, “particularly considering the large numbers of women graduating from university. What applies to companies, applies to entire sectors. Africa’s energy sector will not be able to develop, progress, and remain competitive and relevant if it refuses to transform and move on from being predominantly male-based structure to a diverse status quo. This is 2019, after all.”

All four women will be participating in [African Utility Week and PowerGen Africa](#) in Cape Town this month.

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