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ENGENDERING UTILITIES PARTNER PROFILE LEC, LESOTHO

USAID partners with Lesotho Electricity Company (LEC) to improve women’s participation in Lesotho’s energy sector.

When women serve as leaders and employees, businesses benefit and company performance improves. **USAID’s Engendering Utilities program works to increase women’s participation in the energy and water sectors globally.** In February 2020, USAID partnered with [LEC](#) to design workplace initiatives that will expand job opportunities for women and enhance the utility’s performance.

LEC is a state-owned utility that provides power to over 230,000 customers in Maseru and the area surrounding the capital. ¹ While LEC’s Muela hydropower station generates the majority of Lesotho’s energy, additional electricity is imported from Mozambique and South Africa.² LEC employs over 500 people, but only 20 percent are women. The majority of LEC’s female employees work in customer relations, finance, and human resource roles. Only eight percent of women employed at LEC work in the engineering division.

Recognizing that diverse teams build better businesses, LEC partnered with USAID to increase gender balance across the company and encourage more women to enter Lesotho’s energy sector.

LESOTHO'S ENERGY SECTOR

Access to electricity has grown in Lesotho, but many across the country still lack power—particularly in rural areas. Nearly 70 percent of the urban population has access to electricity, but only 20 percent of the rural population has power.³ The Muela hydroelectric power station generates most of Lesotho's electricity, but demand for power outpaces production. As industrial development grows across the country more customers are being connected to the grid, and demand for power in Lesotho is expected to increase significantly by 2030.⁴ To meet demand, Lesotho imports approximately 35 percent of its annual electricity needs, mostly from South Africa and Mozambique.⁵

Lesotho also has four smaller hydro plants in addition to the Muela hydroelectric power station, but only one is currently operational. In 2003, the Government of Lesotho developed an energy policy which outlines the country's goals for expanding access to renewable energy, especially in rural parts of the country.⁶ Despite the country's high potential for solar, wind, and biomass, plans to diversify the energy sector have not yet materialized.⁷

Engendering Utilities' work with LEC will ensure women can capitalize on growing opportunities in Lesotho's energy sector.

GENDER EQUALITY IN LESOTHO'S WORKFORCE

A complex web of contributing factors prevents women in Lesotho from joining the male-dominated energy workforce. This energy industry represents a potential economic growth area in Lesotho, and the exclusion of women from opportunities in this market deepens the country's gender equality divide.

Lesotho has the world's most extreme gender disparity in education, with more girls enrolled than boys. This is fueled by poverty and unemployment which causes significant numbers of boys and men to migrate out of the country,⁸ as well as the expectation that boys will withdraw from school to support cattle-raising. There are 1.6 girls for every boy enrolled in secondary school in the country,⁹ and more girls than boys enroll in tertiary programs.¹⁰ While more girls attend college than boys, they make up only 23 percent of graduates in STEM-related fields.¹¹

Despite their higher level of education, women are less likely to occupy higher paying positions. Women comprise 98 percent of the textile and apparel workforce in Lesotho; jobs that are low-paying, have poor working conditions, and few career development opportunities.¹² Within the professional workforce, women are more likely than men to hold a professional or technical role, but are less likely to hold senior-level positions or positions of authority. As a result, men earn an average of 56 percent more than women in Lesotho.¹³ The global average wage gap is between 16 and 19 percent.

Harmful cultural practices and gender norms further impact a woman's ability to advance in the workforce in Lesotho. Despite laws preventing it, nearly 20 percent of girls are married before 18, preventing them from finishing their education or advancing in the workforce.¹⁴ Women in Lesotho—which has the second highest rate of HIV infection globally—are disproportionately impacted by HIV.¹⁵ Thirty percent of women have HIV compared to 19 percent of men.¹⁶ Violence against women compounds these issues. One study found that 86 percent of women had experienced physical or sexual violence, over 60 percent had experienced intimate partner violence, and over 60 percent had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.¹⁷ Domestic violence has real costs for companies. One study estimates that violence against women costs \$1.5 trillion in direct costs and lost productivity, globally.¹⁸ Employers that work to reduce and mitigate violence and harassment both at home and work improve the well-being and productivity of men and women at work.

Engendering Utilities supports companies—like LEC—to consider and respond to factors that reduce women’s workforce participation by building inclusive policies and practices that benefit men, women, and businesses in the energy sector.

GENDER EQUALITY IN ACTION AT LEC

Engendering Utilities uses an [evidence-based methodology](#) to support women’s participation in Lesotho’s energy sector. The program supports LEC to increase opportunities for women by introducing gender equality initiatives at each phase of the employee lifecycle: from reducing gender bias at the hiring stage, to creating strategies that will help retain female talent and improve corporate culture change that benefits both women and men. Using a globally recognized [framework](#) for change, Engendering Utilities is supporting LEC in its goal of increasing gender equality across the company’s business practices.

A dedicated change management coach supports the utility and works directly with three staff to become agents of change within LEC. A baseline assessment is conducted to identify gaps and opportunities for improving gender equality across the company. The findings are used to develop a strategic action plan that will facilitate LEC’s gender equality goals. This is supplemented by the program’s partnership with the Georgetown University McDonough School of Business, which delivers the [Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program](#) (GEELP) to three utility employees. The GEELP is a best-in-class 12-month executive course that empowers decision-makers to integrate gender equality initiatives into their corporate structure.

Engendering Utilities will support and accelerate gender equality initiatives at LEC as part of the broader strategic action plan, including:

- **Developing a Full Suite of Gender Equitable HR Policies**, including a gender policy, an equal employment opportunity statement, and a comprehensive sexual harassment policy.
- **Strengthening Outreach to Vocational Schools** to increase recruitment of women and hire more female electricians.
- **Committing to Gender Equality as a Strategic Objective**, including formalizing concrete action plans and policies to mainstream gender equality across the utility’s business practices.

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NOTES

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