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## ENGENDERING UTILITIES PARTNER PROFILE SONABEL, BURKINA FASO

USAID partners with Société Nationale d'électricité du Burkina (SONABEL) to improve women's participation in Burkina Faso'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, Engendering Utilities partnered with [SONABEL](#) to design workplace initiatives that will expand job opportunities for women and enhance the utility's performance.

SONABEL is a state-owned utility that provides power to more than 620,000 people in Burkina Faso.<sup>1</sup> The company operates thermal, hydroelectric, and solar power plants across the country, including the newly built Zagtouli Solar Power facility, which supports national efforts to improve power supply and reduce dependence on fossil fuels.<sup>2</sup> While the company continues to grow, less than a quarter of SONABEL's staff and just four of the company's 20 executives are women.

**Recognizing that diverse teams build better businesses, SONABEL partnered with USAID to increase gender balance across the company and encourage more women to enter Burkina Faso's energy sector.**

## BURKINA FASO'S ENERGY SECTOR

The cost of electricity in Burkina Faso is one of the highest in West Africa, which poses a significant barrier to access for households across the country.<sup>3</sup> Today, only one in four people in Burkina Faso has access to electricity.

While Burkina Faso has the capacity to produce electricity from diesel, oil, hydro, and solar power,<sup>4</sup> the country's power production is low compared to other countries in the region. Burkina Faso relies heavily on Côte d'Ivoire to meet its electricity demand, and in 2017 the country imported nearly 40 percent of its electricity.<sup>5</sup> To capitalize on its solar potential, Burkina Faso partnered with French-based firm, Cegelec, to build the country's first solar power plant, Zagtouli, in 2017. Zagtouli is now the largest solar power generator in West Africa.<sup>6</sup> Burkina Faso plans to build additional plants in the coming years<sup>7</sup> as the country pursues new and ambitious energy goals. The government seeks to increase access to power to 95 percent by 2025, achieve 50 percent renewable energy by 2030,<sup>8</sup> and export oil and gas to other countries in the future.<sup>9</sup>

**Engendering Utilities' work with SONABEL will ensure women can capitalize on increased investment in Burkina Faso's energy sector as the industry and labor force continue to grow.**

## GENDER EQUALITY IN BURKINA FASO

A complex web of contributing factors prevents women in Burkina Faso from joining the formal workforce; particularly the male-dominated energy sector. The energy industry represents an economic growth area in Burkina Faso, and the exclusion of women from opportunities in this market deepens the country's gender equality divide.

While 60 percent of women participate in the workforce in Burkina Faso,<sup>10</sup> they hold lower-quality jobs, have less diverse employment opportunities, and earn less than men.<sup>11</sup> National laws prohibit women from working in jobs that are presumed to affect reproductive capacity or the health of an unborn child,<sup>12</sup> which limits opportunities for women.

Harmful cultural practices and gender norms further impact a woman's ability to join the formal workforce. Early marriage—which disrupts education and workforce participation—is common in Burkina Faso. While the practice is illegal, the law is not strictly enforced. A 2010 study found that over 50 percent of women in the country were married before age 18, and 10 percent were married before age 15. Women in Burkina Faso manage and perform the majority of household tasks. One study found that 90 percent of people in Burkina Faso believe unpaid care work is a woman's responsibility, and 70 percent do not believe household work should be shared.<sup>13</sup> When employment policies and practices are inflexible, women are unable to balance the responsibilities of work and home.

Violence against women in Burkina Faso compounds these issues. Official reporting of physical, sexual, and intimate partner violence is low, yet the 2010 Burkina Faso Demographic and Health Survey found that over 60 percent of women report experiencing psychological abuse from their partners. The survey also found that over 75 percent of women in Burkina Faso have experienced female genital mutilation;<sup>14</sup> a human rights violation that is illegal in the country. Violence against women has real costs for companies. One study estimates that violence against women costs \$1.5 trillion in direct costs and lost productivity, globally.<sup>15</sup> 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 SONABEL—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**

Engendering Utilities uses an [evidence-based methodology](#) to support women’s participation in Burkina Faso’s energy sector. The program supports SONABEL 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 SONABEL 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 SONABEL. 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 SONABEL’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 already underway at SONABEL as part of the broader strategic action plan, including:

- **Mutelle des Femmes**, a network that connects women at SONABEL with professional development opportunities and a social network of women employed in the energy sector.
- **Development of a Male Engagement Strategy**, which identifies and supports male leaders as champions of gender equality at SONABEL.
- **Professional Skills Training Program**, which builds the skills of female candidates who applied for vacant positions, but lacked the experience required. The trainings will increase the qualifications of prospective employees, making them more competitive for future openings.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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## NOTES

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