



Photo: IBEDC Nigeria

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

Where are the women? is the unofficial slogan of Engendering Industries partner, Ibadan Electric Distribution Company (IBEDC), the largest energy distribution company in Nigeria. The remark was first made when an IBEDC executive was asked to speak on an all-male panel about women in executive roles. [Research](#) shows that all-male panels, sometimes referred to as “manels,” are common in the workplace globally, even when women’s issues are being discussed. The experience drove IBEDC to amplify the voices of female staff across its workforce.

“When an organization develops the habit of asking, *where are the women?*” you notice that men are always dominant,” said Daniel Yoha Odey, Head of Change Management at IBEDC. “I recently developed a recruitment list and noticed that all of the positions were previously occupied by men. Strategic communications will help us grow our brand as an equal opportunity employer for men and women.”

Communication plays an important role in shaping company culture at an organization as large as IBEDC, which employs 2,600 full-time staff and an additional 2,000 freelancers. IBEDC conducts gender equality advocacy, outreach, and messaging using internal communications channels, such as the *IBEDC Voice* newsletter, and externally through conferences and events, including the [DISCO \(Discussing Issues Surrounding Career Opportunities\) for Women Conference](#). Using these platforms, IBEDC is able to profile the company’s gender champions and tackle difficult issues, like implicit bias and sexual harassment in the workplace.

USAID’s Engendering Industries program works with organizations from around the world to develop innovative communications, marketing campaigns, and events that normalize and increase the participation of women in male-dominated industries. This story features successful communication initiatives from two partner organizations; IBEDC, the largest power distribution company in Nigeria, and Edesur, a power company in the Dominican Republic.

Angela Olanrewaju, Head of Communications at IBEDC, describes these efforts as a “gender rebranding process” that aims to increase female recruitment, advance women’s careers, and promote the equitable treatment of male and female employees.

“We want all of our staff and future employees to know that we are deliberate and intentional about our gender equality initiatives,” Ms. Olanrewaju said. “In all of our communication, we strive to show gender balance. If we do a job advertisement, we publish a photo that includes a man and a woman. If we host a panel, you can be sure there will be women on that panel.”

Each year, IBEDC convenes the DISCO for Women Conference, which provides women with access to mentors, networking and speaking opportunities, and the information, motivation, and encouragement needed to advance their careers. The conference was first envisioned by Engendering Industries champion and IBEDC human resources executive, Ehi Obaseki, who saw a need to develop a mechanism for advancing the careers of female staff at the company, and women in male-dominated industries in Nigeria more broadly. The conference is now in its fifth year.

“Through these communications efforts, we are working to change a cultural mindset that has existed for generations,” Ms. Olanrewaju said. “As a result, we’ve seen an uptick in women enrolling in company-sponsored training programs, and have been working with Engendering Industries to use strategic communications for recruitment, training, and onboarding new employees.”

CAMPAIGNING IN THE CARIBBEAN

Engendering Industries partner, [Edesur](#)—a large energy utility in the Dominican Republic—is also harnessing the power of communication to change corporate culture and social attitudes towards women. The Dominican Republic is known for its patriarchal attitudes towards women, and tragically, for some of the highest rates of femicide in the world. National conversations around gender-based violence

continue trending in the Caribbean country, and Edesur’s communication strategy is designed to drive the conversation among employees and society more broadly.

“It is vital for Edesur to communicate externally about gender equality issues,” said Jenny Gonzalez, Head of Communications at Edesur. “We are sending the message to all men in society—all husbands and all people—that women are valued. Women are capable. Women are doing technical jobs with Edesur, and we are working to hire more women to do this work,” Ms. Gonzalez said.

Under the direction of Ms. Gonzalez, the company has led external media and public relations campaigns, gaining recognition for the company’s gender equality initiatives on national-level television programs and in [magazines](#). Edesur uses social media to showcase female employees working in diverse technical areas, using videos, interviews, and photography to highlight the many contributions female staff make to Edesur’s overall missions. In 2021, Edesur celebrated International Women’s Day with an event in which eight women were recognized with [Edesur’s Women of Light](#) honors, an award ceremony presided over by Edesur’s CEO. The event was highlighted by major media channels across the Dominican Republic.

“In terms of external communication, there is a lack of appreciation for how easy it is for an organization to communicate that they promote gender equality and inclusivity,” explains Jasmine Boehm, Engendering Industries’ Gender Equality Change Management Advisor. “Using gender diverse photos or even just one phrase on inclusivity can trigger the perception that this organization is interested in women working for them.”

The company also uses creative approaches to raise awareness of gender issues internally among the organization’s 3,000 staff. In 2020, Edesur held a film festival, screening movies that tackle gender equality topics. Employees were encouraged to take time off of work to attend the four-part film series, which included the

films: *On the Basis of Sex*, a biopic about the life and work of US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, as well as *Hidden Figures*, a film about the black female mathematicians who worked at NASA during the Space Race. After the screenings, Edesur led group discussions about the issues presented in the films.

“At first, supervisors thought we were wasting their staff’s time, but then we got the CEO’s support,” said Yndhira Mendoza, who works in communications at Edesur. “We realized that the younger generation was more open to gender equity, and believe that gender equality is a universal right. The older men, however, still have opinions rooted in another time,” explains Indira.

As part of Edesur’s internal communications efforts, the company sends all-staff emails and newsletters that raise gender issues, spur conversation and debate among staff, and demonstrate Edesur’s dedication to gender equality. The organization also engages men as allies for gender equality, encouraging men to participate in communications activities and discussions, and asking men to speak up and speak out when actions, language or behavior occurs that diminishes women in the workforce.

“Communication from leadership and between groups of people at an organization drives change,” said Ms. Boehm. “The film festival is a perfect example of an easy-to-implement activity that does not require a lot of resources but successfully brings people together to communicate about the issues presented.”

While these communications efforts promote gender equality, encourage debate, and have the power to change gender-norms in male-dominated industries, they also have important business performance impacts. Expanding women’s participation in large utilities, like IBEDC and Edesur, decreases staff turnover, making companies more attractive to prospective employees. Research shows that increased gender equality improves an organization’s business performance metrics and helps companies meet their bottom-line goals by enhancing employee satisfaction and driving productivity.

“Working with USAID’s Engendering Industries program opened our eyes wide,” said Ms. Gonzalez. “The program taught us to understand complexity and see everything through a gender lens. Now when we do internal communications campaigns, everyone is commenting on what they saw in the latest newsletter. It’s important to create these opportunities for internal dialogue and debate.”

Engendering Industries partners with 41 organizations in 27 countries to increase gender equality and women’s workforce participation globally. Learn more at <https://www.usaid.gov/engendering-industries>.

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de marzo de la Mujer

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