



Sun King

Building a Long-term Pipeline of Women Leaders: Targeted Recruitment Strategies and Investments in Building the Capacity of Women to Grow into Leadership

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Access to Power and Renewable Energy as an Alternative Solution

Between 2010 and 2019, more than one billion people gained access to power globally but about 760 million people are still in the dark. About 640 million of these people live in rural areas—far from the electricity grid—and 570 million live in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).¹ For millions of others in SSA, access to power remains unreliable or unaffordable.

Renewable energy is growing rapidly as an alternative solution in Africa. By 2040, renewable energy could account for more than 60 percent of new power generation in SSA, and this expected expansion will create new jobs.² In 2020, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) estimated that the RE sector employed 219,000 people in SSA, and about half of these jobs (110,000) were in the off-grid solar photovoltaic (PV) sector.³

Renewable Energy Sector and the Gender Gap

Despite the growth in the renewable energy sector, women are being left behind—they are lagging men in both leadership and technical jobs. This trend is a concern because a large body of evidence demonstrates that having women in leadership positions, and a gender-balanced workforce, positively correlates with a company's innovation, resilience, quality of services, reduced financial and reputational risk, and improved environmental standards.⁴ A company is gender balanced when it has between 40 and 60 percent of either gender at all levels of the organization.⁵ In sum, diverse companies are more competitive than their peers.

IFC's Energy2Equal Initiative

In 2019, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), in partnership with the Government of Canada, launched the five-year [Energy2Equal](#) (E2E) program—the first Sub-Saharan Africa initiative to address gender gaps in the renewable energy sector.⁶ A key component of the initiative is a peer-learning-platform where 10 companies have exchanged best practices on implementing gender-smart solutions that can help to improve business performance, foster innovation, attract more talent, and better engage with communities. This "E2E Company Insights" profile is part of a series of short studies that highlight successful gender equality approaches taken by companies participating in E2E to enhance their recruitment, retention, and promotion of women.

About Sun King

In 2007, T. Patrick Walsh, Anish Thakkar, and Mayank Sekhsaria, three engineering school graduates, co-founded Greenlight Planet (renamed [Sun King](#) in 2022),⁷ with the mission to replace smoky, dangerous kerosene lamps in Africa and Asia with simple, solar-powered lights. Their goal was to sell low-cost, solar-powered lamps to the 1.2 billion underserved rural people in developing countries who have no access to electricity—either because it is unavailable or unaffordable.

Today, Sun King is a for-profit social enterprise that designs, distributes, and finances solar home energy. It is a global leader in the portable solar power segment, providing a suite of renewable energy products to off grid homes in Africa and Asia. Sun King's products have improved the lives of 82 million people in the 65 countries where its products are distributed. Further, the company has generated 500,000 MWh of solar energy and offset 22 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂).



The Gender Challenge

To meet the ever-growing demand for energy and having secured a \$260 million investment—the largest investment in the portable solar power segment to date—Sun King is continuing to expand its workforce. The company already has offices in 11 countries, and more than 2,000 employees, and 15,000 field agents.

Sun King primarily employs engineers, sales experts, and operations specialists—fields where women are typically under-represented. In 2019, when Sun King was facing a challenge in attracting female candidates for certain roles, as well as achieving a gender balance at managerial levels, and above, the company joined IFC's [Energy2Equal](#) (E2E). As a member of the E2E peer-learning-platform, Sun King wanted to gain insights about how it could increase women's participation in the company's workforce and learn from global best practices. As part of the E2E program, Sun King undertook a workforce diagnostic and invested in ways to increase the number of women in leadership.

Sun King's gender diagnostic was undertaken at the group level to better understand the challenges the company faces in recruiting, retaining, and promoting women, as well as in achieving a gender balance across the company's roles. Historically, women were severely under-represented in Sun King's global data analytics, technology, and direct sales positions. Women were also under-represented at its headquarters as well as in some countries, such as India, Nigeria, and Zambia. In 2019, Sun King had about 1,200 employees and women comprised 36 percent of the workforce, but of 200 managers, only 23 percent were women, despite women receiving half of all promotions. Once Sun King had the results from its gender diagnostic, it began implementing recruitment and leadership development initiatives to reduce the company's gender gap.

Gender-inclusive Recruitment Strategies

As the applicants for Sun King's vacant positions were typically only men, to be more gender inclusive, the company redesigned its recruitment strategy and processes. In 2021, it conducted a six-month pilot to attract more women for its global data analytics team, as well as more women for its operations in Nigeria, and Zambia.

Sun King's new recruitment strategy sought a broader range of talents as this was more likely to include female applicants. The company also promoted the value of embracing diverse perspectives, internally, and emphasized this in its vacancy announcements, which now include a strong statement about how the company embraces diversity, and the value that diversity brings to the company's culture and its competitiveness (Box 1). Vacancy announcements also stress Sun King's commitment to gender equality by including data on the high percentage of women in the company's workforce (47 percent in 2022). This sends a strong signal that women are wanted, valued, and supported at Sun King.

For recruitment outreach, Sun King tapped into its employee networks and offered rewards for female candidate referrals. Sun King also incentivized recruiters to target and short-list female candidates for interviews, which has increased female recruits. To mitigate interviewers' potential unconscious bias, the company's human resources staff employ a blind recruitment process that removes candidates' names from their CVs so that their applications are gender neutral. The company has also increased the number of women participating in its interview panels.

"Women have genuinely been considered for, and hired into, roles that previously would have been filled by men."

Radhika Thakkar

Vice President, Corporate Affairs

Standard Diversity Statement in Vacancy Announcements

We place great importance on sustaining a diverse, inclusive work environment. We believe that diversity (of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, national origin, personality type, perspective, and all the other fascinating characteristics that make us different) enriches innovation and our competitiveness in the market.

We strive to ensure that diverse perspectives inform critical decisions, and we actively work towards ensuring that all Sun King employees feel like they belong. We also know that sustaining an inclusive workplace requires conscious effort and is a continuous journey, not an end-state.

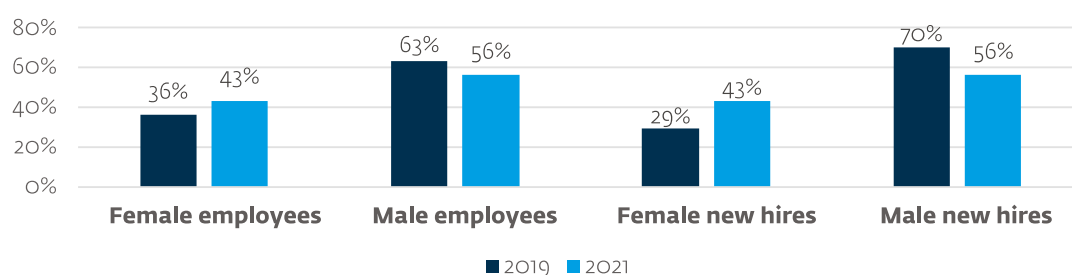
Sun King recruits, employs, trains, compensates, and promotes individuals based on experiences and demonstrated job performance, regardless of race, color, religion, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, national origin, HIV/AIDS status, disability, or any other protected characteristic as established by law.

Sun King is committed to gender equality in the workplace. Women represent 47 percent [2022 data] of the company's workforce.

The results of Sun King's pilot have been positive. Between 2019 and 2021, the company's female employees, across all levels, grew by 44 percent, and the number of managerial roles held by women increased by 50 percent. Radhika Thakkar, Vice President of Corporate Affairs said, "Women have genuinely been considered for, and hired into, roles that previously would have been filled by men." In 2022, Sun King formalized its pilot of inclusive recruiting process, and it is rolling out this new approach across all of the company's functions and country offices.

Between 2019 and 2021, Sun King's employees nearly doubled to 2,000, and about 800 new positions were added to the overall workforce. This growth has enabled the company to raise its workforce gender balance from 36 percent to 43 percent, which is in line with international standards (Figure 1). Since 2019, there has been a notable increase in the number of women Sun King has hired—rising from 29 percent in 2019, to 43 percent in 2021.

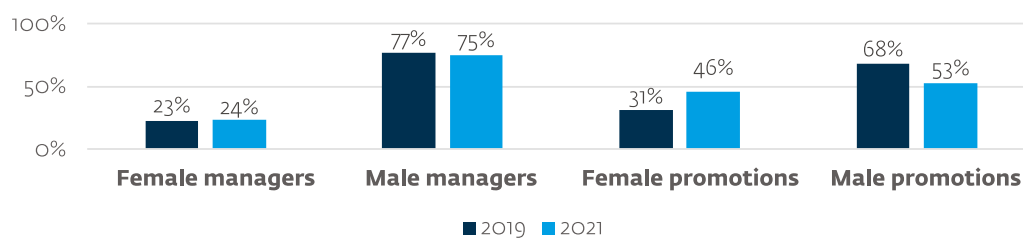
Figure 1: Workforce and New Hires



Source: Sun King

Between 2019 and 2021, the number of Sun King managers, overall, increased by 43, and of these new management positions, 13 were filled by women. However, while the absolute number of women managers increased, the percentage of women in these positions remained nearly the same, at about 25 percent (Figure 2). Conversely, the percentage of women who were promoted rose from 31 percent in 2019, to 46 percent in 2021.

Figure 2: Managers and Promotions



Source: Sun King

Leadership Development

Under IFC's E2E program, Sun King made a second commitment—to invest in women employees by providing leadership development training with specific targets for women. Also, in some vacancy announcements, Sun King includes a description of the training and the other benefits that women employees are offered. For example, one announcement stated, “Structured, tailored learning and development programs that help you become a better leader, manager, and professional through the Greenlight [now Sun King] Academy.” For its premier 10-month leadership development program, Greenlight (now Sun King) Leadership Foundations, the company ensured that the pipeline of high potential talent was more gender balanced. Since 2020, the company has had three leadership training cohorts, and women comprised 40 percent of the program's trainees (14 women).



Results

Sun King's investment in gender diversity is paying off. In December 2021, Great Place to Work®, a global authority on building, sustaining, and recognizing high-trust, high-performing workplace cultures recognized Greenlight (now Sun King) as one of the "Top 5 Best Places to Work in Nigeria" in a mid-sized company.⁸ Companies were assessed on five criteria, including respect for people, fairness in the workplace, and camaraderie between co-workers. This recognition is a reflection of Sun King's work culture that continues to enhance the company's ability to attract top talent, and especially female talent, while also improving the company's overall competitiveness in putting innovative solar energy products on the market that are opening up new possibilities for people who are no longer living in the dark.



End Notes

- 1 IEA (International Energy Agency), IRENA (International Renewable Energy Agency), UNSD (United Nations Statistics Division), World Bank, and WHO (World Health Organization). 2021. "Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report". Washington DC: World Bank. https://trackingsdg7.esmap.org/data/files/download-documents/2021_tracking_sdg7_chapter_1_access_to_electricity.pdf.
- 2 IEA (International Energy Agency). 2019. "Africa Energy Outlook 2019": World Energy Outlook Special Report. Paris: IEA <https://www.iea.org/reports/africa-energy-outlook-2019>.
- 3 IRENA (International Renewable Energy Agency). "2020 Renewable Energy and Jobs – Annual Review 2020". Abu Dhabi: IRENA.
- 4 EY Canada (Ernest & Young). 2019. "Could gender equality be the innovation boost utilities need?" March 8, 2019. https://www.ey.com/en_ca/women-power-utilities/could-gender-equality-be-the-innovation-boost-utilities-need;
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- 5 ILO (International Labour Organization). 2019. "The Business Case for Change. Women in Business and Management". Geneva: ILO.
- 6 IFC (International Finance Corporation). n.d. "Energy2Equal: Empowering Women in Africa's Renewable Energy Sector". https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/news_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/news+and+events/news/energy2equal-africa.
- 7 Sun King. n.d. "Powering Access to Brighter Lives Through Off-grid Solar". Sun King corporate website accessed June 1, 2022. <https://sunking.com/>
- 8 Greenlight. 2021. "Greenlight Planet Listed Among the Top 5 Best Places to Work in Nigeria 2021". The Guardian. Sponsored article. December 28, 2021. <https://guardian.ng/features/greenlight-planet-listed-among-the-top-5-best-places-to-work-in-nigeria-2021/>

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