



DOMINICAN POWER UTILITY MOVES GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE OUT OF THE SHADOWS

In 2019, USAID’s Engendering Utilities partnered with EDESUR—a large Dominican power utility—to increase gender equality and women’s participation in the company’s workforce. In recognition of 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, Engendering Utilities sat down with a group of three EDESUR employees from the departments of human resources, communications, and research and development to discuss the utility’s efforts to combat sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the workplace

HOW DOES THE ISSUE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IMPACT A UTILITY LIKE EDESUR?

Broadly speaking, sexual harassment and gender-based violence create psychological damage. When you are experiencing gender-based violence or sexual harassment, it occupies your whole mind. You cannot focus on your work. You cannot be productive. It impacts you, the people around you, and of course, the organization as a whole.

Second, the nature of our work is such that our employees are not always in a secure building or office surrounded by people. There is a fear in the Dominican Republic that women who are working in the field in a technical role are vulnerable to becoming victims of sexual violence. Fear of the threat of sexual violence has consequences for women. They become confined to the office; to administrative work. That is not fair. You cannot prevent women from doing technical work because you are scared of what might happen. You have to give them a chance, and you have to create the conditions that will allow women to thrive.

There is a third consideration, and that is the perspective of the family; the husbands of

EDESUR DOMINICANA, S.A. (EDESUR)

After a 1999 law divided the state-run sole-source electric utility in the Dominican Republic, EDESUR was formed.

The company serves over 800,000 customers across the southern region of the Dominican Republic.

In 2019, EDESUR partnered with Engendering Utilities to increase gender equality and economic opportunities for women across the organization.

Of the company’s 3,290 employees, 37 percent are women.

working women. Most women who work have a typical schedule. They go to work at eight, come home around five, and the rest of their day is occupied by household responsibilities. When you work in a technical role in the energy sector, you do not have typical hours; it is likely that you will be working at odd times of the day. This has the potential to create conflict and upset traditional gender dynamics of a family, and that has the potential to result in violence. This is one of the consequences of the culture of machismo, and one of the ways it negatively impacts working women.

WHAT ROLE DO LARGE COMPANIES, LIKE EDESUR, PLAY IN COMBATTING AND MITIGATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

In the Dominican Republic we have a very strong culture of machismo which can be seen in all aspects of life. Traditionally, men go to work and women stay home and do not participate in professional life. This dynamic has resulted in many men in our country believing they are superior to women, and this belief exacerbates gender-based violence in our country. When we say gender-based violence we are talking about physical, emotional, psychological, and mental violence, in this case against women. In November of 2019 we set a national record--the worst kind of national record a country could set--and that record was for the number of femicides that happened in one month. Each year we have a growing number of cases of women being murdered in our country, at times by their intimate partners. Women are being devalued. Women are staying in relationships because they don't feel they have economic alternatives. They ask themselves, 'How will I survive and how will my children survive if I leave this man?' We are a large employer in the country, and by providing

more opportunities to women we have a contribution to make in this area.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE THINGS EDESUR IS DOING TO COMBAT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

We are working on a number of initiatives, both internally and externally. Women in the Dominican Republic need more options, and we want to recruit and hire more women. When we started working with USAID's [Engendering Utilities](#) program our eyes were opened wide.

The program taught us to see everything through a gender lens, and now we see problems differently than we used to. Now we understand complexity. For example, a goal of ours is to hire more women, but we were not writing our job ads in a way that would attract more women. The words and photographs we were using in our ads made it seem like the position was only suited for a man, or that the utility only desired a man, and that was not our intention. It's a simple example but it concretely illustrates a bias we were not aware of until the program pointed it out.

Through our work with Engendering Utilities we also began focusing more on internal training and communication to increase internal awareness of the issues of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. We started training male employees on these issues so they could become allies for women, not just at the company but also in their communities. We began conducting internal male outreach, running workshops and focus groups, and screening and discussing films about gender issues. We formed a women's association at the utility, and had discussions on gender-related topics with this group as well.

We also began improving our external communications. The issue of gender-based violence is a trending topic in the Dominican Republic right now, and we are committed to joining this conversation. We take this into account in what we communicate externally and what we promote in the media, whether it's social media or the newspapers. It is vital that we communicate externally about this issue. Through our external communication we are sending the message to all men in society, all husbands, all people, that women are capable. Women are valued. Women are doing technical jobs with EDESUR, and EDESUR is working to hire more women to do these technical jobs. We want images of women doing technical roles to become normalized; women in the streets solving technical problems, working with power lines, using equipment, just as a man does. We want this type of communication to reach the spouses of women who are working in the energy sector, or who wish to pursue a career in this field.

WHAT WAS THE REACTION OF EMPLOYEES AT EDESUR AS YOU BEGAN TO DISCUSS ISSUES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT INTERNALLY?

The response was very interesting. In the Dominican Republic, sexual harassment is so common that everyone thinks it is just a normal part of life. People don't see it as a problem unless it is something egregious; something physical, for example. So, our employees were surprised to hear that giving a woman a compliment could be seen as sexual harassment. Men were particularly surprised to hear that compliments are often unwanted by women, and that what men perceive to be a "compliment" can actually have the opposite effect; it could make a woman feel small and uncomfortable. We found that men required a lot of clarification on behaviors that are acceptable, and behaviors that are not acceptable. For example, men asked questions like, "Should I no longer carry something heavy, like a gas tank, for a woman? Should I no longer open a door for a woman?" We clarified that these are common courtesies you might extend to any person—male or female—and are ok. But commenting on someone's appearance or making a sexual joke, these are not acceptable behaviors.

Through our focus groups with female employees we learned more about how gender issues have been affecting them. Women talked about the need to control their reactions when they hear, for example, a "dirty joke" from a man. Women spoke about how they laugh and play along with offensive comments because they don't want to be seen as "problematic" or "too sensitive." Women want to avoid creating an awkward situation at work, so they say nothing.

The men were surprised to hear that their female colleagues felt this way. They were shocked; they had no idea. The majority of men who participated in these discussions, however, were open. They were receptive to what they were hearing and open to change.

WHAT WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT TAKEAWAY FROM YOUR INTERNAL TRAININGS AND DISCUSSIONS ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

The creation of a sexual harassment policy. We began talking about creating a sexual harassment policy in our women's focus groups, and our female colleagues asserted that a sexual harassment policy was needed. When an organization adopts a sexual harassment policy it strengthens the organizational culture and demonstrates to everyone in the organization that sexual harassment will not be tolerated. We drafted the policy and it went through the review channels of senior leadership. With commitment from our new CEO, the policy has been adopted and we will soon begin the process of rolling it out to the company. Having learned from other utilities that introduced sexual harassment policies, rolling it out will involve awareness training and consultation on how the policy will be implemented.

As you create a sexual harassment policy, you must also create a secure system that protects women who report. Alongside the policy, we are working to create a secure environment for women to step out and feel comfortable reporting their experiences.



EDESUR employees complete the Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program delivered by Georgetown University and Engendering Utilities.

HOW COMMON IS IT FOR A COMPANY IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC TO HAVE A SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY?

It is not common at all. Even though we have a law at the national level prohibiting sexual harassment, most organizations and institutions do not have an internal policy prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace. This is still a new concept for most companies and we are proud to be at the forefront of this.

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR MEN TO ENGAGE OTHER MEN ABOUT GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

It's vital. In our culture, when a man raises this topic with another man it lends credibility to the seriousness of the issue. From an organizational perspective, it is important to not have just one man in the organization talking about the issues of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, like a lone wolf standing by himself. Other men must also speak out against gender-based violence and sexual harassment. As more men speak out, more men will become convinced that yes, it is vital that we work on and change this situation. Not just for women, but for men too. Sexual harassment and gender-based violence is just as bad for men as it is for women.

They see this female engineer, they see that she is successful, and they see that she is satisfied with her career and her role with the company. This is important for generating buy-in from female students.

DO YOU FEEL THAT EDESUR'S INITIATIVES WILL HELP COMBAT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC?

Yes, and the communication aspect of our efforts is vital. Too often, men see women as property. When women get empowered, they have the choice to accept or not accept that treatment. When women get employed, they get empowered. If they don't have a good job and the means to survive, they will stay in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, especially if they have children, because they don't have the means to survive without the man. We are doing our part to change this.

Violence against women has been happening for hundreds of years. And while it has proven difficult to change, we are committed to our efforts. We have a saying: "*Tanto da la gota en la piedra hasta que le hace un hoyo.*" Eventually, small drops of water will drill a hole in a rock. Whatever we can do to stop gender-based violence—whatever is in our power—we have to do it, and we are going to do it.

ABOUT ENGENDERING UTILITIES

When women serve as leaders and employees, businesses benefit and company performance improves. USAID's Engendering Utilities program works with companies, organizations, and agencies around the world to increase women's participation in male-dominated industries. By introducing gender equality initiatives at each phase of the employee life cycle, the program expands job opportunities for women while enhancing company performance. Recognizing that gender-equitable teams build better businesses, EDESUR partnered with Engendering Utilities to advance gender equality across the organization. Engendering Utilities supports EDESUR by:

- **Providing a framework to implement gender equality interventions.** USAID's Delivering Gender Equality: A Best Practices Framework for Male-Dominated Industries provides partners with the resources they need to implement gender equality interventions across the employee life cycle.
- **Demand-driven change management coaching.** EDESUR receives expert change management and gender equality coaching and tailored technical support.
- **The Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program (GEELP).** Developed by USAID and Georgetown University McDonough School of Business, three EDESUR staff participated in this 12-month course which empowers employees to integrate gender equality initiatives within their organization's structure such that they are beneficial to the utility's overall business performance.

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