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## **BREAKING BARRIERS:** Ethel Atupele Bvalani

*Ethel Atupele Bvalani, Senior Risk Management Officer at EGENCO, spoke to the Engendering Industries Partner Network about the importance of empowering and inspiring girls to pursue careers in male-dominated sectors.*

**HOW CAN WE SUPPORT YOUNG GIRLS TO PUSH PAST THE GENDERED STEREOTYPES THAT OFTEN PREVENT THEM FROM PURSUING THEIR PROFESSIONAL DREAMS?** It starts at home. I grew up in a house where there were six children: four boys and two girls. In our culture, women are asked to do the cooking and cleaning inside the house, while boys are expected to work outside the home. I did not grow up in a home where I was made to feel that because I'm a woman I should be in the kitchen. Everybody in our family knew how to do everything. I actually learned to cook from my brother! Both of my parents worked, and my mom worked outside the home in a bank. This was a different experience from many of my friends whose mothers stayed at home. I saw a woman working, and so working felt natural to me.

I was always so curious about mom's bank job. I knew banks held people's money. When our parents gave us money for anything—lunch money, money for our commute to school—I would save what I could and give the rest to her to put in the bank. And she encouraged this practice. She was helping me create a healthy relationship with money. She would say, "If you get money, you can save it for use later." I soon saw that financial responsibility created independence. I saw my mom buy a house and I thought "Okay, if I get educated, I can own a house too someday."

**IS THIS WHY YOU DECIDED TO PURSUE AN EDUCATION IN FINANCE?** At a pretty early age I decided I wanted to be a boss. My brother was doing a business administration degree and he told me that this would make him a boss. That caught my interest. In the second year of business school

students are split into two groups: some enter business administration, and high performers are selected for the accounting program. I was placed in the accounting program. This was hard for me because I was pretty bad at math and accounting screams math. But I knew that if I was going to be a boss, I needed to understand accounting. It was a good choice. I usually like the more comfortable option, so I look back on that choice now and think, “Who made that decision!” I am honestly very proud that I chose the less comfortable path. It’s because of that decision that I am where I am right now.

**WHAT HAPPENS TO GIRLS WHO DON’T HAVE THE FAMILY OR ACADEMIC SUPPORT THEY NEED TO PURSUE A PROFESSIONAL CAREER?**

This question makes me think of a friend who was extremely good at math; better than me. By the time we turned 14 or 15 she got a boyfriend and stopped taking school seriously. Unfortunately, it’s culturally entrenched for girls to value marriage over anything else. I received a very different message at home. My mom would say, “You prioritize school over marriage.” This type of messaging made the difference for me. There are many young women who are in a cultural environment that pushes them towards marriage. This is only reinforced by the lack of professional female role models for girls. We didn’t have people coming through our primary and secondary schools speaking to us about what they do at work. For example, young children know what doctors and nurses and teachers do. But children are not exposed to professionals who are “Risk Management Officers” for example. We need to expose young girls to these types of opportunities so they can see what is possible for them.

At EGENCO we work hard to do outreach to female students. I wish I had the exposure EGENCO provided when I was a young girl. EGENCO currently supports 16 female students, providing them with computers and mentorship. Each year female EGENCO engineers go to schools to speak with students. It causes girls to think, “Wow, here is a woman engineer. She did it. I can do it.” I joined EGENCO in 2018, and, at that time, there were no women in management. That has changed in the last four years. The Director of Finance is a woman. The Director of Corporate Services is a woman. I see women in positions of power. It’s inspiring.

**DID YOU ENCOUNTER ANY GENDER-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES AS YOU ROSE THROUGH THE RANKS TO BECOME A FEMALE LEADER IN YOUR INDUSTRY?**

Yes, there were challenges. In my first job I encountered a phenomenon in which, during meetings or at lunch time, the men would sit at the head table and the women would sit on the outskirts. This did not sit right with me. The people who were in the positions I wanted—the leaders, the bosses, the managers—were all men and they were all sitting together. The women were not at the table. So, I would come into the room and I would take a seat at the men’s table. I was a girl back then, an excited girl who wanted to sit with the bosses.

There were unintended and unforeseen consequences to this. I soon learned that rumors were spreading that I must be sleeping with one of the men at the table because a woman “couldn’t otherwise get there.” This is a consequence of gender inequality in a workforce: it is so unfathomable that a woman could earn her place among leadership that the only possible explanation is untoward behavior. No one thinks twice when a man goes and sits with the boss. He must be there because of his talent and value. As I’ve grown older it has become easier to sit at the table and not feel intimidated.

**EGENCO IS ALSO WORKING TO IMPROVE THE PERSONAL FINANCIAL SECURITY OF FEMALE AND MALE EMPLOYEES. WHILE THIS IS IMPORTANT FOR BOTH GENDERS, IT IS CRITICAL FOR WOMEN, WHO ARE LESS LIKELY TO MANAGE HOUSEHOLD FINANCES.**

**CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THIS INITIATIVE?** Until recently, women in Malawi did not have rights to

their husband's wealth. This made women particularly vulnerable to "property grabbing," as old laws granted the man's relatives—regardless of how distant a relative they were—to lay claim and receive an equal share of his earnings. This is another reason why it is so important for women in Malawi to have their own money. A woman who has and manages her own money has freedom. She is not at the mercy of her husband or his family. That security is very important. So, yes, EGENCO does offer important retirement planning services, and gives employees information and lessons on financial planning, investing, etc. This is an important step in advancing the financial security of female employees.

*Ethel Atupele Bvalani is a Risk Management Officer, currently acting as Chief Risk Management Officer for Electricity Generation Company Malawi Limited (EGENCO). At 31 years of age, Ethel is the youngest woman at the company to ever achieve this position. She holds a bachelor's degree in Accountancy from the University of Malawi, Polytechnic and is earning a Professional Management Accountant qualification (CIMA).*