



BREAKING BARRIERS: Harriet Banie

Harriet Banie, an electrical engineer at GRIDCO, spoke to the Engendering Industries Partner Network about what it takes to advance women in Ghana's male-dominated power industry.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS ARE NEEDED TO ADVANCE WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE?

First, all organizations should have a mentoring system that is available to everyone; where employees can get feedback and have confidential discussions. All staff should be trained on gender equality, so we can generate an impartial way of thinking and working that counters bias. We need to create space to ensure everyone understands that when we talk about gender equality, we're not just talking about women. We need to teach people how to make everybody feel included, and let everybody know why diversity is important. We need to teach people how to work with others without discriminating.

Organizations also need strong reporting systems. If you have a challenge and a confidential way to report it, you will do it. Without a trustworthy and confidential reporting system, you won't know where to turn. You become timid. Most people are afraid of being publicly outed for making a complaint. If they think that is a possibility, they won't do it.

WHEN YOU JOINED GRIDCO AS A YOUNG FEMALE ENGINEER, YOU SAID YOU WOULD SPEND HOURS PREPARING FOR MEETINGS, ANTICIPATING QUESTIONS, AND IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS. DID THE MEN ON YOUR TEAM DO THIS?

No; this was a double standard. The men didn't trust me, and I had to prove myself every step of the way. I read about things that had nothing to do with my job so that I could have an edge. I knew that I had to prove to them that I could do my job well. The problem was that I had to start performing my job alongside them before they were convinced. This was pure discrimination.

HOW DOES GRIDCO SUPPORT WOMEN TO ADVANCE THEIR CAREERS? First of all, our policies. We have a nondiscrimination policy. We have a maternity leave policy, which allows women to go on maternity leave and return without their salary, promotion, or career being affected. We have educational benefits. GRIDCo is also committed to the Engendering Industries program, is supporting the team, and is eager to improve upon the policies that we have. It's a good start and I know we are going to get it right.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR WOMEN WHO WISH TO FOLLOW IN YOUR FOOTSTEPS BUT ARE FACING DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES SUCH AS BEING DISCRIMINATED AGAINST, MISTREATED, OR OTHERWISE DISHONORED AT WORK? If you want to do something, you have to be committed to that vision. Get the passion moving, and you will achieve it. You have to persevere no matter the challenges. You have to be positive; there is an end to everything and the hard times won't last forever. Work hard to achieve your goals. That is one of the key things that I don't compromise. If it has to be done, I do it well. I do it, and I do it perfectly. Finally, respect everybody and acknowledge everybody, no matter how little, how inferior you think they are.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO MEN WHO BELIEVE HIRING WOMEN IS A WASTE OF TIME? Men and women are different. If you hire a woman, she'll bring something unique. If you hire a man, he'll bring something unique. When you add them together, that inclusiveness brings things to a new level. Research shows that companies that have more women, equal opportunities, and no discrimination are winning. They have better productivity. When you bring the talents of both genders together, all the good comes together.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE MALE CHAMPIONS TO ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN YOUR ORGANIZATION? Very important. And some might not even know they are champions, but they are giving women opportunities because when they work with women they see positive results. While we have many male champions, we want to engage men more. We want male champions to be formalized in their role so that women can go to them for support and mentoring, for example. Going forward, we will take up this charge. Men need to get educated about gender equality and understand and appreciate why it's important. Some men think women are trying to take over their roles. No; that's not what gender equality is all about. It's not a competition. Women aren't walking around saying, "We want to take your jobs." We just want the same opportunities to advance and to do that we need your support and your allyship. Men need to know this is not about women attacking them in some way.

WHAT WORDS OF ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER TO WOMEN WORKING OR LOOKING FOR OPPORTUNITIES IN MALE-DOMINATED SECTORS AROUND THE WORLD? I want to encourage all of the females, especially the engineers, to come out of their shells. Stop hiding. If you want to get to the top, let them see you. People don't know you if they don't feel you, don't hear you, and don't know your passion. Don't get mad. Don't listen to the stigma. Do your best. Work hard. Show them what you can do. Together we can build a strong life. Together we all can achieve our dreams.

Harriet Owusu-Banie is an electrical engineer at GRIDCo, where she supervises project construction and commissioning work. She has a master's degree in Electrical and Electronics Engineering from the University of Education in Winneba, Ghana, and a bachelor's degree in electronics and communication from All Nations University. Her leadership at GRIDCO has been instrumental in the implementation of large power projects across Ghana.