



## BREAKING BARRIERS: Wola Joseph

*Wola Joseph, Chief Legal Officer at Eko Electricity Distribution Plc (EKEDP), spoke to the Engendering Industries Partner Network about implementing survivor-centered approaches to workplace harassment.*

**TELL US ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY TO BECOME A LEADER IN NIGERIA'S MALE-DOMINATED POWER INDUSTRY.** I am the fifth in a family of six children and always wanted to excel in everything that I did. I experienced a hardship early in life, losing my dad at the age of five. I grew up with my mom playing both the mom and dad role, and she was my champion and role model. My mom shaped who I am today as a leader, instilling in me qualities like discipline, hard work, and dedication. These qualities have enabled me to deal with the challenges that come along with working in a male-dominated industry. They have allowed me to develop a tougher skin.

**HOW HAS THIS TOUGHNESS HELPED YOU OVERCOME BARRIERS AND ADVANCE YOUR WORK?** Mental toughness has helped me remain afloat and focus on what I want to achieve. Even though I work in a male-dominated workplace, that is not the lens through which I view my work. When I come into work, I am focused on getting the work done. I am not focused on whether anybody is treating me differently because I am female; that is the truth.

But women do experience unequal treatment, which is why I work—and EKEDP as an organization works—to support women. I cannot talk about what I am doing personally without describing what EKEDP has done. Creating a gender-balanced environment does not happen by chance, it requires deliberate effort and planning, and EKEDP has taken many steps to create a supportive work environment for women—and particularly women with children. For example, we have a strong culture of mentorship because the company has created a policy that requires us to mentor younger females.

When young women join the organization, they are partnered with mentors in the C-suite. This is an example of a formal process. Informally, I have many mentees. I have a talent for mentoring the younger generation and that is because I had a difficult journey getting to where I am today, and I do not want other women to go through that. I have an open-door policy for mentoring. Also, I support our female engineers. Just the other day I had a female engineer in my office and I was encouraging her to form a union of female engineers at EKEDP. We have about 2,500 engineers and only 32 are female. I am quite deliberate in trying to create gender balance between men and women. I deliberately reach out to women, and I recruit a lot of female interns, paid interns. It is a great way to get more women in the door.

### **WHAT POLICIES HAS EKEDP IMPLEMENTED TO CREATE A MORE SUPPORTIVE**

**ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN?** The first time we discussed gender equality and creating a sexual harassment policy was with the Engendering Industries program in 2015. At that time, I was the Chief of HR. Since then, we have created several policies. Our core investors and our board identified that sexual harassment was an issue that needed to be addressed to create a more conducive working environment that was safe for all. Currently, we have a sexual harassment policy, a mentorship policy, and we recently put together our gender-based violence policy.

We are doing everything we can to ensure that sexual harassment is taken seriously and there is data that shows how important this is. There was a study done by the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University that found that 25-85% of women were being harassed at work, depending on the country. A study by End Rape found that in Nigeria, 64% of women have been sexually harassed at work. And some sexual harassment goes unreported. Gender-based violence is a family issue that spills into a corporate issue because it affects the lives of the employees. It affects their mental health. We have seen studies that GBV can negatively affect a country's GDP by five to six percent. GBV is a government issue, an economic issue, a work issue, and a family issue, and it should be tackled on all fronts. As soon as we joined USAID and Engendering Industries, we started doing research and tweaking our policies to get them in line with international standards.

**CAN YOU TALK MORE ABOUT EKEDP'S SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH?** In the survivor-centered approach we put together, we let the survivor know the different options that are available to them, but nothing is imposed on the survivor. Our goal is for the survivor to feel safe at work going forward. They have already had a traumatic experience, and we recognize that there is a thin line between asking them to come forward and invading their privacy. So, we are very careful. The confidentiality of interactions with the survivor is paramount. When sexual harassment or GBV is reported, we speak with the survivor and ask them whether they are comfortable with escalating. As the chief legal person at the organization, I am mindful of the fact that sexual harassment is a criminal offense, but we will not press charges if the survivor is uncomfortable with that. The survivor drives the process and determines the steps we take. The options are presented, and the survivor decides what they want to adopt. Sometimes, the survivor wants to take time off work, and that is allowed.

We also have an in-house professional counseling office with a certified and registered counselor and a psychologist. Sexual violence cases are routed to them. We have training in which all senior managers are trained and certified as counselors. We found that this was critical because when sexual harassment happens in the workplace, people tend to go to their manager and, if you do not have the necessary experience, you will not know how to handle it. We reinforced with managers that the well-being of the

survivor is the most important when a complaint is filed, and not the organization. Victims' wishes must be respected and maintained at all times.

**HOW HAVE THESE NEW POLICIES IMPACTED COMPANY CULTURE?** They have helped greatly. You find employees are happy to come to work. You find that interactions amongst employees are better. They have improved the way employees view themselves and each other. The company reputation has improved, as word spreads that we are a gender-friendly organization and a gender-protecting organization. We have a zero-tolerance policy for harassment and discrimination. Employees know that their promotions are driven by their performance. The concrete changes I have seen are men behaving better and women feeling safer. Between 2015 and now there has been an increase, almost a doubling, of women working at the company. In my assessment, that means that people perceive us as a gender-friendly company, and the bottom will reflect that.

*Wola Joseph is the Chief of the Legal and Company Secretariat Department at EKEDP. She holds a law degree from the University of Ibadan, an LLM in International Finance from Harvard Law School, and a Global Executive MBA from INSEAD Business School. In 2018, Legal Blitz ranked her one of the top 40 under 40 Lawyers greatly impacting the legal profession in Nigeria. In 2021, she received an award from the Association of Lawyers in Oil and Gas Nigeria for her years of distinguished service in the Power Industry.*