



Photo: EVN Macedonia

## IN NORTH MACEDONIA, THE FUTURE IS FEMALE:

How a Power Utility is Opening Doors for Girls and Women

Nearly [one-third](#) of university-educated North Macedonians emigrate in search of opportunities abroad; one of the highest rates of human capital flight in Europe. Educated women are now the [fastest growing group of migrants](#) in Europe, and [economists](#) believe that reducing gender discrimination in the labor market could help countries like North Macedonia curb emigration and retain female talent. In 2015 USAID's Engendering Utilities began working with EVN, the national electricity distribution utility, to increase opportunities for women across the company.

[USAID's Engendering Utilities](#) supports [EVN](#) to increase women's participation in North Macedonia's energy workforce. Nearly forty percent of EVN's employees are male technicians, many of whom will be retiring over the next ten years. Faced with an aging workforce and a limited national talent pool, the utility knew it had to build the next generation of STEM professionals.

And they needed to include girls.

"The situation with the job market and people leaving North Macedonia becomes more challenging each year, and recruiting and retaining people in engineering and IT positions is particularly difficult," [said Aneta Petrovska-Rusomaroski](#), Head of Human Resources and Organization at EVN. "Even recruiting students for summer internships becomes more difficult each year. We saw an opportunity to build a pipeline of talented women to fill our technical positions, but no girls were applying for our internships. I called a meeting with the directors of North Macedonia's vocational schools and asked, 'Why aren't we getting female applicants for our internship program?' They laughed at

## EVN MACEDONIA (EVN)

After the privatization of North Macedonia's state-owned power company, EVN Macedonia emerged in 2006.

The company serves over 800,000 customers across Macedonia.

In 2015, EVN partnered with Engendering Utilities to increase gender equality and economic opportunities for women across the organization.

Of the company's 1,800 employees, 21 percent are women.

my question. ‘They don’t enroll in the program because girls can’t perform these jobs,’ they said.”

### YES THEY CAN

EVN felt a responsibility to combat cultural biases against girls and women in the energy sector, and embarked on a mission to inspire girls to pursue vocational education and training and start a career in a growing industry. With support from Engendering Utilities, EVN began designing outreach campaigns targeting girls in primary schools across Skopje. Female staff from EVN visited schools, discussed opportunities for women at the company, encouraged girls to think about jobs in the power sector, and reiterated a strong and clear message: girls and women make great engineers and technicians. The utility brought media, articles, and photos that showed female utility staff climbing poles, troubleshooting technical issues, and performing manual work. The impact of their outreach was encouraging, and started shifting the perceptions of both parents and students.

“Before this outreach initiative, not a single girl from a vocational school was enrolled in our internship program,” Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski said. “In the first year of our campaign, female enrollment increased from zero to five percent. While we want that number to be higher, we are proud of this achievement. Before it was not even regarded as a possibility for primary school girls to enroll in VET programs for technicians.”

### MAKING STEM FUN FOR GIRLS

The success of their school outreach efforts solidified the importance of inspiring children--and particularly girls--to pursue technical careers, and the utility wanted to do more.

EVN turned an old hydropower station into the [Matka Exhibition Center](#), a museum where children could learn about the interesting technical aspects of electricity and power. The utility encouraged schools to visit the museum, and organized tours and activities. A trip to the museum was incorporated into the country’s national STEM curriculum. The museum uses videos and [photos of girls in their marketing and programmatic material](#) to make STEM more attractive to girls, and in 2017 the Matka Exhibition Center welcomed over 7,000 visitors.

“It is a key goal of ours is to inspire girls to pursue careers in STEM, and to show that all careers in our company and in our industry are open to both boys and girls,” said Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski.



Promotional Material, Matka Exhibition Center. Photo: EVN

## BUILDING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Research from around the world suggests a correlation between gender equality and improved company performance. A McKinsey & Company study of 1,000 companies across 12 countries concluded that gender-diverse companies are more profitable than their national industry averages.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, it can be difficult to convince managers to hire more women, and women's participation in the workforce remains low. Engendering Utilities helps organizations develop a business case for gender equality to persuade senior leadership that equality is good for business. Gender equality can improve productivity, attract a stronger talent pool, and position an organization as the employer of choice for women.

Developing a business case for gender equality is critical for achieving buy-in and strategic action from all staff, particularly senior leadership. The business case provides a justification for undertaking the gender equality program, helps organizations evaluate the benefit, cost, and risk of alternative options and provides a rationale for the preferred solution.

By supporting organizations to identify business priorities and examining sex-disaggregated organizational data, Engendering Utilities helps organizations determine how gender equality will help achieve strategic business goals.

## CHANGING PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GIRLS' POTENTIAL

The utility complemented its external outreach with internal outreach efforts, seeking to shift staff attitudes about women and girls. In 2016 EVN held its first [Take Your Daughter to Work Day](#). The event was designed to showcase energy careers to girls through experiential learning and presentations. Over the course of the day, girls performed technical tasks alongside their parents, and sat side-by-side listening to talks about the important role women play in the company, and the even greater role they could play in the future of the power sector.

"It's very hard to say that a single activity can change or shift mindset, but this event was not just a 'check the box' moment; it was very impactful," said Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski. "Our Engendering Utilities coach trained us and prepared us for the event. The concept was so new and the quality of the event was so high that [the media covered it](#) at the national level. It was the first time in North Macedonia that a big company like ours implemented an event like this."

Months later, utility staff disclosed that their daughters were still impacted by the positive experience they had accompanying their parents to work. Nearly 90 percent of surveyed staff said the event had a positive impact on workplace culture, and made them proud to be an EVN employee.

"Something interesting and unexpected happened after the event. Employees started asking, 'Why are we just taking our daughters to work? Why are we excluding the boys?' We used this question to start a conversation about the many ways that girls are excluded; that being excluded isn't nice. The next year we also invited the boys," Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski said.

## SCHOLARSHIPS AND INTERNSHIPS FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

To continue encouraging girls to pursue a STEM education, EVN joined forces with two other power utilities in North Macedonia to create a scholarship program. Each year the three utilities award scholarships to 15 outstanding students, and over the last several years the majority of EVN scholarship recipients have been women. Today, two out of every three electrical engineering students who receive scholarships from EVN are female.

"There has been a positive correlation between our scholarship program and increased interest among girls to pursue energy as an area of study," Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski said. "There has also been a positive correlation between our scholarship program and increased interest in energy and power systems amongst faculty at the University in Skopje. The program has been a good lever for increasing interest in our company, and in the energy industry more broadly."

The utility also created an internship program, providing STEM and vocational students with the opportunity to gain work experience while discovering if a career in energy is right for them. The utility collaborates with technical

universities to organize workshops and market internship opportunities. Over 60 percent of the interns at EVN to date have been female.

“We always bring a female engineer to our university workshops,” Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski said. “We want female students to hear the female perspective, and see these positive female role models. 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.”

### THE NEXT GENERATION

Between 2016 and 2018, the utility improved their existing apprenticeship for engineering students in their final year of study. The highly competitive program, The Next Generation EVN, accepts students into a 12-18-month training program. Students apply and participate in a two-day assessment process in which their technical skills, knowledge, and soft skills are assessed by utility staff, who use Engendering Utilities’ gender-inclusive interview techniques to eliminate bias from the process. In just one year, and with support from Engendering Utilities, the Next Generation EVN program increased female participation from 38 percent in 2018, to 62 percent in 2019.

“This has become a sought-after program by graduates. Everyone knows it’s hard to enter our program, and it becomes a challenge to try and get in,” Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski said. “This program and the gender-inclusive hiring techniques we learned from Engendering Utilities has brought more female employees into engineering positions than ever before. This year, 50 percent of our shortlisted candidates are women, and we expect all of these candidates to accept a position with the company.”

### PROMOTING WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

In 2017 EVN organized the first-ever “Women in Energy” conference in North Macedonia to raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in the energy sector, identify strategies and programs to accelerate gender balance, and to serve as a catalyst for knowledge sharing and networking. The utility also used the conference as an opportunity to showcase and model their progress; in 2017, 43 percent of applicants and 39 percent of new hires at the utility were women. High profile figures, including the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia, the U.S. Ambassador to North Macedonia have attended the conference. During the 3rd annual conference in 2019, the utility changed the name to “Women in Industry” to expand the reach beyond the energy sector.



Women in Industry Conference, 2019. Photo: EVN Macedonia

“We have become famous in North Macedonia for our [Women in Industry Conference](#),” said Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski. “In 2017 we organized the first conference on “Women in Energy,” but at that time there were very few women in the energy sector, especially in senior and top management. The question became, “Where are the women in Energy?” All of the sudden, this issue entered the national public discourse. We realized we were effectively moving the discussion forward.”

Today, the conference underscores the economic imperative of creating gender

inclusive and sustainable growth in North Macedonia and the region. EVN Macedonia hopes to work with other companies as well as international NGOs and partners to host the conference in other countries, expanding opportunities for women in the energy sector worldwide.

## **EVN'S BUSINESS CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

EVN enjoys many benefits of their gender equality work. By revising HR policies, processes, and procedures across the employee life cycle to open more doors for women, they also attracted a more diverse employee and talent base, including candidates from different backgrounds, nationalities, and social statuses. This new talent pool brings fresh perspectives and new ideas to EVN, which the company values.

“Promoting gender equality allows us to attract better candidates which leads to improved performance,” Ms. Petrovska-Rusomaroski said. “By improving retention, we decrease the cost of recruiting, hiring and onboarding new people. Our internship and apprenticeship programs allow us to work with potential employees to see if it is a good mutual fit, saving us the high costs of hiring the wrong people and investing resources to train them over a period of 12-months, only to have them leave. Overall, our work with Engendering Utilities and our overall gender equality programs have helped us improve our bottom line.

## **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, EVN partnered with Engendering Utilities to continue advancing gender equality across the organization. Engendering Utilities supports EVN 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.** EVN 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 EVN staff participated in this 12-month course which empowers employees to integrate gender equality initiatives within their organization’s structure.

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