

WOMEN IN GREEN SECTOR LEADERSHIP

How to bridge the gender gap



Clare Nasir talks to Monica Collings

There is untold pressure on the Green Sector to deliver multiple, practical, scaled solutions that will reverse the climate crisis and guide future generations into a safer and fairer environment. As an industry, the resources necessary to achieve this gargantuan task must include a diverse set of people; a demographic that it has failed to attract so far.

Here, Monica Collings adds weighty insights into where the industry stands currently in bridging the gender leadership gap.



Monica Collings

Diversity is crucial for tackling the world's biggest problems because it allows us to understand the whole picture.

Diverse perspectives arise because people come from different backgrounds and experiences.

Diversity is not just about acknowledging differences; it's about harnessing their power to create a more complete picture and inclusively tackle complex issues.

Only through a broad range of human experience can we truly understand the challenges and solutions that will deliver Net Zero for all.

Monica has an impressive track record in strategy, growth, and governance across diverse sectors, including retail, property, and FMCG.

An award-winning former CEO with deep experience across the energy sector, her expertise scales businesses, navigates complex situations, and drives sustainability

as a Non-Executive Director and Chair for various organisations enabling the transition to Net Zero.

A strong and trusted voice on gender equality and a sought-after speaker on the energy transition.

Monica is a Green Executive Board Advisor.

From your experience what are the greatest challenges for women in reaching top-level leadership roles?

It begins with creating the right environment for women to have the opportunity to succeed.

Women have more career interruptions during their lives than men, although that's not to say men are better or worse, but just different.

For more women to rise to senior roles, they need to be fully supported. Flexibility is central to how we support them.

Organisations are recognising the value of Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity, DEI, by creating workplaces where there are the right policies that treat everyone fairly, and where people feel valued and respected for their contributions.

We are seeing more women reach their full potential and achieve those C-suite positions.

However, it remains challenging.

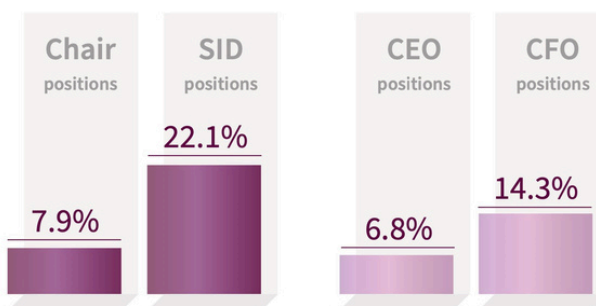
During the time I was the only female chief executive running a domestic energy retailer, data from POWERful Women's State of the Nation report revealed there were just six women in CEO positions across the top 80 energy businesses, in the UK. That number has since dropped to four.

A recent release from [Women on Boards Hidden Truth Report](#) suggested that women in AIM (Alternative Investment Market) listed boards are also falling back, with 35% of all AIM-listed companies having all-male boards. That's an increase of 80 companies since last year.

Scratching below the surface progress is stagnating and some numbers are reversing.

Hidden Truth Report 2024

Across the FTSE All-Share and AIM listed firms* analysed, women hold:



*Note: This data excludes Investment Trusts

I cannot say this strongly enough – the job is not done. Gender diversity in UK listed boards has improved, yes, but an unacceptable number of board tables are still male-dominated. I sense a real danger of attention drifting on this issue. If companies are tired of the focus on board diversity, there is one obvious route to moving on – that is, to diversify their boardrooms.

WB **Fiona Hathorn** CEO WB Director
The Hidden Truth,
Diversity on boards across UK listed firms 2024

Are women attracted to leadership across the Green Sector?

There is a focus on getting women into senior roles, particularly at the attraction end.

What we don't track quite so well is their engagement in those roles once appointed, and then the attrition rates of those people leaving.

In a Women's Utilities Network report into unconscious bias, almost a third who responded to the survey stated they were quite likely or very likely to leave the utility sector in the next 1 to 3 years.

Retention rates in the industry are facing challenges, and without supportive policies to establish conducive environments for women to not only work but also flourish, their retention will be compromised.

There are many reasons why women are not staying, but fundamentally in these traditionally heavily male-dominated sectors, women are still marginalised and the bias they experience, whether conscious or unconscious, remains present for many.

Are women not applying for C-suite roles?

Two things here....

Firstly, sometimes it doesn't occur to women to put themselves forward.

Given this, there is now an interesting approach to succession planning being trialled, where organisations require women to proactively opt-out rather than opt-in for consideration as part of the process. The idea is that everyone is potentially capable of being a senior leader unless they explicitly say otherwise.

Secondly, and more importantly, it's about being marginalised.

WUN

**Unconscious bias is creating
a credibility crisis**

If we fail to address bias in our workplaces, growth and innovation will suffer as a result. Less diverse workplaces will also discourage women from choosing careers in utilities; worsening skills gaps and intensifying the challenges of our transition to net zero.

Women's Utility Network
Unconscious Bias Report, 2024

For some people, it doesn't matter whether you're male or female, it's the situation that you find yourselves in that drives a particular response. Quite often I was the only female in the room in my former chief executive role.

And now, as a board director, I sit as the only female NED on most of my boards and advisory groups.

As a confident female leader that doesn't phase me at this stage in my career, but I am conscious that my lived experiences, and therefore my perspectives, are different (but also valuable) as a result of my gender.

At points in my career, it was not that I didn't think I could do a more senior role. More so, I didn't put actively myself forward, because it just didn't occur to me that, in that moment, I was in a position where I could or should want to do so. I believe it's the responsibility of brilliant leaders to spot the opportunities for their rising stars and encourage their development to realise their full potential.

To share an interesting story that was expressed to me where the reverse happened - with only one man in a room full of women. The women were violently agreeing on a point. The man had an alternative perspective on the conversation but didn't feel like he could speak up due to the wall of consensus he faced.

If you are the only person and you lack representation, it can be quite challenging to be heard and to confidently, even effectively, voice your opinion.

Is it lonely being in a top-level leadership?

Yes, it can be lonely, because you often don't have peers to confide in, in the same way that perhaps other parts of the organisation can tap into.

Having a 'personal board' is useful for those in senior leadership roles.

Perhaps including people who have walked in your shoes and can relate to your specific challenges.

But also those who can pick you up when you're down. It's important that you can confide in someone who will give you candid feedback too.

I'm part of a mentoring network. I believe so strongly that everyone should have a mentor. You can never be too early to start in that journey.

More specifically for women within organisations, sponsorship is equally as important as mentoring; having people who can champion you and put your name in the frame when there are interesting projects.

To push you forward when you might not necessarily be in a room to promote yourself.

Often male allies will champion women to make sure that they are represented which is useful, as often there are more of them in decision-making positions to provide access to opportunities.



Are women in leadership underrepresented across the green sector?

A BCG (Boston Consulting Group) [study](#), of more than 1700 companies in 2019 showed that diversity increases the capacity for innovation and expands the range of companies' ideas and options, leading to better financial performance.

However, the same data showed that only an average 23% of the energy sector is made up of women, one of the lowest numbers in any major sector. **There's only been a 1% increase in that number from 2020 to 2023.**

We are not seeing the level of progress in bringing women into the workforce, especially at senior levels.

If we can't have the representation of our customers and communities because we don't have women included in those conversations, then it hinders our problem-solving capabilities. And for the women starting out their careers, if they can't see brilliant female role models, they can't be them.

More needs to be done around how we improve female representation, particularly amongst the 20% of energy companies where shockingly, no women are on boards.

It's a growth sector. The solutions the world needs to reverse accelerating climate impacts require sharp minds with fresh approaches and brilliantly inclusive leadership.

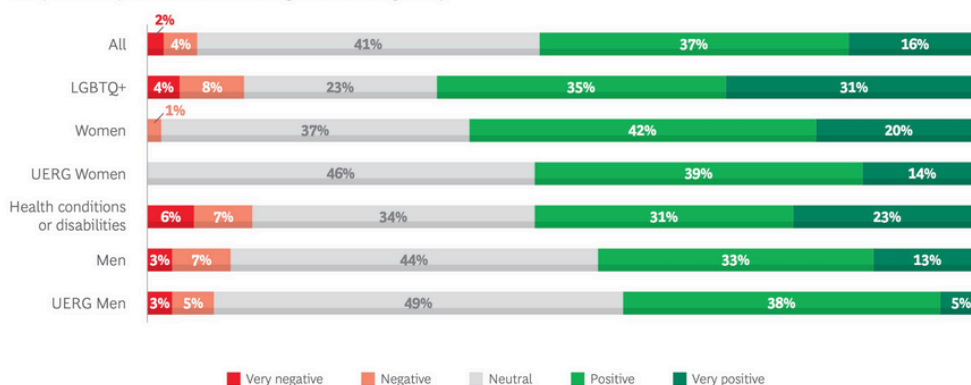
Even in oil and gas, historically male-dominated, large-scale innovation and change are happening, which brings the requirement for new skills and capabilities. If we aren't open to exploring more flexible ways that encourage women into the

workforce, including women from outside the energy sector who have useful transferable skills from relevant adjacencies, **then how can we expect to deliver on net zero on time?**

Flexible working models are discussed in BCG, [Untapped Reserves 3.0 Advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Energy Sector](#), September 2023. Here evidence points to many positive outcomes for women and their career trajectories.

Exhibit 7 - Underrepresented Groups Report that the Expansion of Flexible Working Models Has Had a Positive Impact on Their Careers

% reported impact of flexible working on career trajectory



Sources: Untapped Reserves 3.0 individual survey; BCG analysis.

Note: N=775 energy industry employees surveyed for the Untapped Reserves 3.0 individual survey.

How can executive search companies ensure there is a level playing field?

New [analysis](#) by S&P Global Sustainable1 discusses the broader picture of women in leadership. They conclude, while companies have focused on gender diversity recently,

the climb to equal representation in leadership positions is proving to be a slow one. However they note that women are taking on an increasing share of STEM-related positions.

The path to senior leadership often begins on the lower rungs of the management ladder. In order to increase the number of women in senior management roles, there needs to be a pipeline of talent in more junior roles.

S&P Global, March 2024

Women in Leadership: What's the hold up?

POWERful Women's, [State of the Nation report 2024](#), female representation in the UK energy industry reveals the latest data, concluding that after good progress in bridging the gender gap between 2020-2022, the numbers indicate a slower rise in the past year and **more efforts are required to continue to build a strong pipeline of future women leaders.**



Companies 'diverse hires' often only relate to counting heads with an emphasis on how to get the right number of women *into* roles.

They must also look at attrition rates - the length of service, and understand the reasons why women are leaving roles, important in exit interviews.

We might be filling the hopper but if the environments aren't right to hold on to amazing new talent, then we're never going to reach the gender targets that we're talking about.

Other practical points that all contribute to underlying good practice:

- Balanced interview panels
- Removing gender-biased language through processes
- Design recruitment processes that extend beyond traditional or legacy expectations of core competencies and experiences

As an illustration, I was told by a neurodivergent individual that in order to adequately prepare for an interview, they required access to an organisational chart to grasp the company's structure.

From a company's perspective that's just good practice. **It's good business. Good for all.** Why wouldn't you make that available for everyone as part of an excellent candidate experience?

There's often an immediate requirement to bring in senior hires, and finding those more diverse candidates, particularly women who may or may not be overtly looking, and often fewer of them, takes longer. So as well as considering flexibility, it's also how run our recruitment processes.

Are organisations prepared to wait for those broad and diverse candidate lists, or is it always an immediate need?

There is also an onus on recruitment organisations, to be aware and prepared

with broad pools of talent that they can tap into and access. Being cognisant of what some of those candidates require in terms of the flexibility of policies will enable them to be considered for roles. There's a responsibility on search firms to challenge the established narrative on what is required as we continue on this journey to net zero.

I genuinely believe it goes right back to early years education too, and how STEM subjects are promoted with children; to encourage openness and exploration of all experiences and subjects. Women in Nuclear, WiN are doing some important work in this area. If we put boys and girls in boxes early on in their lives, those ideals become embedded, and are carried through formative years into their views of work.

As Monica discusses, this isn't about simply providing numbers on a shortlist. The brief needs to be kept broad and with an emphasis on softer skills, as opposed to hard, narrow key competencies. Keeping a search too specific, for example, requiring energy experience, then already the female candidates are in a minority as they only boast 30% of the current market share.



Joe Hetherington, Managing Partner
Green Executives

A recent FT [article](#) suggested that women in a similar role to a man will work harder to prove their place in a leadership position. What are your thoughts?

I've seen that in my career, sometimes I've prioritised work over my family and sometimes the other way around - it's a constant balancing act. But there's an element of fluidity to it. There will always be times when you get that balance wrong one way or another, and beating yourself up about it doesn't help.

We all have many responsibilities outside work, from children to elderly parents.

It's important to design workplaces that can be inclusive so that everyone can bring their whole selves.

We start by comprehending the unique needs of each individual, ensuring they can fulfil their role to the best of their capabilities and providing support to help them succeed.

It comes down to **true leadership** at the end of the day and a **human-centric approach**.

The expectations of a female executive are just different. They are overextending themselves . . . at the expense of themselves.

Vivienne Artz,
Head of the
[FTSE Women Leaders Review](#).

What's your approach to creating an inclusive workplace?

Four practical, tangible things organisations can do:

1. Flexible working and supportive policies.
2. Balancing the opportunities for promotion with fair promotion practices.
3. Getting real commitment from senior leaders to support that feeling of inclusion amongst employees.
4. Be intentional about how we recruit and bring people into the organisation.

That will make a big difference.

A 'belonging strategy' starts with how organisations facilitate the right environment so that it is culturally embedded.

This always links back to how the organisation and leadership support their teams and people. The values that they uphold as important, and underpinned by a behaviours framework that sets the expectation consistently across the whole company.

From decompression areas that allow people to reset after stressful meetings or calls, to recognising religious practices and spaces, and understanding economically strained times when staff may need more support than normal.

All may seem like very small things in isolation, but they add up and contribute to belonging. Affinity networks have a big role to play, in brainstorming problems and challenges that people face, equipping them with the relevant tools.

Can you suggest any organisations that are proactive for women and their careers?

Great organizations are leading the way in promoting gender diversity in the energy sector, such as the [Women's Utility Network \(WUN\)](#), [POWERful Women](#) and [Women in Nuclear, WiN](#).

Additionally, [Women on Boards](#) focuses on increasing female representation in C-suite roles. These initiatives offer valuable data and resources.

For instance, POWERful Women publishes the annual State of the Nation report, which assesses the gender diversity at the top 80 energy companies by examining their board, C-suite, and middle management compositions.

The Hidden Truth Report from Women on Boards looks specifically at the CEO, CFO, Chair and Senior Independent Director roles in companies and the number of women that hold these positions cross-sector.

WUN works across utilities - energy and water predominantly - and some of their latest research has been interesting into the untold truth around biases.

WiN have been promoting diversity and gender equality since 1992.

All these groups, and the work they do to shine a spotlight on the underbelly of the sector, it important so that we're not overstating progress. What gets measured, gets delivered after all.

Final Thoughts

Studies show that diverse teams are more innovative and better at problem-solving. These are essential skills necessary for systemic change.

*There have been far-reaching changes in the business environment over the past few years, yet, companies with diverse leadership teams continue to be **associated with higher financial returns**. Our expanded dataset shows this is true across industries and regions, despite differing challenges, stakeholder expectations, and ambitions*

McKinsey, Dec 2023

Diversity Matters Even More: The case for holistic impact.

We've got 304 months left to reach Net Zero. That's going to demand a whole load of new skills and new capabilities.



It is imperative to have a diverse group of talented individuals collaborating with a common vision and strong leadership to effectively represent customers and communities from a multitude of backgrounds.

One shining light is the UK's new Labour cabinet, where 50% is women. Less than 10% went to private schools, injecting more diversity into central government leadership to aid better decision-making.

Progress has been achieved, but this now needs to be supercharged to facilitate systemic, positive changes; fundamental in preventing further environmental and social tipping points that will ultimately lead to an increasingly unpredictable future.

If we approached the challenge of gender equality with the same impetus as other major transformation programmes then we'd soon overcome the barriers that exist. Then I do think that we will accelerate the progress and make sure that we deliver a far and just energy system.

Our thanks for Monica Collings for her time and insights.

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www.greenexecutives.com

