



Report 1

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Senior Leadership and Key Decision-Making Roles in the Irish Energy Sector

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report evaluates diversity in senior leadership within the Irish energy sector, with a particular focus on key decision-making roles. The report identifies:

- The current state of representation at board and executive levels.
- The drivers and barriers to achieving greater diversity in the sector.
- A series of recommendations for improving diversity in key decision-making roles.

The findings and analysis are based on the REDIE project's state-of-the-art international literature review on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the energy sector, interviews with 16 with senior leaders and EDI experts in the Irish energy sector, and an analysis of publicly available gender statistics at the executive and board levels of key firms.

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Diversity in leadership must go beyond gender

While the underrepresentation of women in leadership within the energy sector is well-documented and demands attention, efforts to address other aspects of diversity – such as race, age, and socio-economic background – are limited and often overlooked in practice.

2. Targeted representation is required in key decision-making roles

Many Irish energy firms have set targets to improve diversity at the board and executive levels. However, these targets often fail to focus on the most influential roles, such as Chairperson, CEO, or CFO, where positions among women and other underrepresented groups are particularly scarce. Succession planning should prioritize these positions to enhance diversity where it matters most.

3. Accountability and action of senior leadership is critical

Both the literature and interviews highlight that greater diversity in senior leadership is significantly driven by the active involvement of top management. Linking diversity targets to senior executive performance and assigning specific EDI responsibilities to senior leaders are effective strategies for ensuring accountability and fostering change.

4. Organisational hierarchies can influence decision-making ability

Traditional hierarchical structures, where decision-making authority is concentrated in a single CEO, can limit diverse perspectives at the top. Exploring alternative management models, such as joint or multiple CEOs, could promote more diverse decision-making. In addition, creating new C-suite roles – such as a Chief Sustainability

Officer – aligned with emerging business needs can broaden representation in key leadership positions.

5. Diversification of leadership is needed across business functions

Leadership roles and business functions in the Irish energy sector are highly gendered. Men tend to occupy the majority of ‘core’ operational positions such as engineering and commercial leadership roles, while women are more frequently found in ‘business support roles’ such as HR and regulation. Even in non-STEM areas, such as finance, men account for around 80% of executive positions. Linking diversity targets and initiatives at the business function level, rather than the general leadership level, could lead to more balanced representation across executive positions.

6. Corporate policies for cross-functional upskilling and flexibility

The supply of potential candidates is a barrier to the levels of diversity among senior leaders. However, interventions are heavily focused on entry and lower-level positions. Companies should prioritize cross-functional upskilling and retraining at the senior management level. Furthermore, enhancing workplace flexibility has been identified as a critical factor in improving women’s representation in senior leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The lack of diversity in senior leadership positions and boardrooms across the energy sector is well-documented internationally (Baruah, 2017; Allen, Lyon and Stephens, 2019; Clancy and Feenstra, 2019; Mang-Benza, 2021). As the sector continues to decarbonise, the opportunity to diversify and promote equality at the leadership level has become more pressing and actionable. However, in Ireland diversity in senior leadership, particularly in key decision-making roles, remains low.

Historically, the energy sector has been male dominated with low levels of participation of groups such as women, people of colour, and ethnic minorities (Abd Majid and Jaafar, 2023; Luke, 2023, Welton and Eisen, 2019). This lack of diversity is reflected and perpetuated at senior leadership levels and persists despite expansive employment opportunities and continued influxes into the energy workforce.

The shift to renewable energy offers an opportunity to enhance diversity in the energy sector due to the large demand for workers. In addition, the shift to a more labour intensive sector encourages participation among a wider spectrum of groups. However, data from members states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that only 20–25 per cent of jobs in the renewable energy industry are held by women, and the majority of these are “lower-paid non-technical, administrative, and public relations positions” (Pearl-Martinez, 2015, cited by Baruah, 2017).

Several barriers hinder workforce and leadership diversification, including:

- An emphasis on technical qualifications
- Cultural and societal norms
- Self-perception of abilities
- Lack of networks
- And biased concepts of leadership qualities or requirements

(Das et al, 2019; Baruah and Gaudet, 2019).

This report examines senior management at the board and executive levels in core organisations of the Irish energy sector to determine the current state of representation in the industry, identify the issues behind any imbalances, and provide recommendations to improve equality and diversity in these positions. Barriers to more diverse and equal leadership and decision-making in the context of the energy transition are examined through the social and structural dynamics of organisations and broader society.

Throughout the REDIE project, careful consideration was given to how EDI can contribute to positive change in the energy transition. The following analysis pays particular attention to the key decision-making roles within senior leadership positions, ensuring the analysis and recommendations for more equal, diverse, and inclusive representation are substantive, rather than descriptive.

“Strategic decision-making roles” (Bose et al, 2022) are examined, including an analysis of gender representation at the top leadership levels, such as Board Members, CEOs, and CFOs. Gender diversity levels in leadership positions across different business functions are also examined more closely to distinguish between ‘soft’ versus ‘hard’ roles, how these roles may be gendered, and the impact this difference could have on diverse decision-making in the energy transition in practice.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The research, data, and analysis for this report are drawn from the REDIE project’s state-of-the-art international literature review on EDI in the energy sector, sixteen elite interviews with senior leaders and EDI experts across public, private and multinational energy organisations in the Irish markets, and data collection of publicly available gender statistics at the executive and board levels of these core firms.

The key energy sector organisations in the Irish energy sector are mapped below and were informed by interview respondents who identified these firms as essential actors within the Irish energy sector and energy transition, including firms involved in energy supply, production, system operations, trading and statutory bodies. This is not intended as an exhaustive list but provides a useful snapshot of the key organisations within the Irish energy system and energy transition.

Figure 1: Map of key energy sector organisations

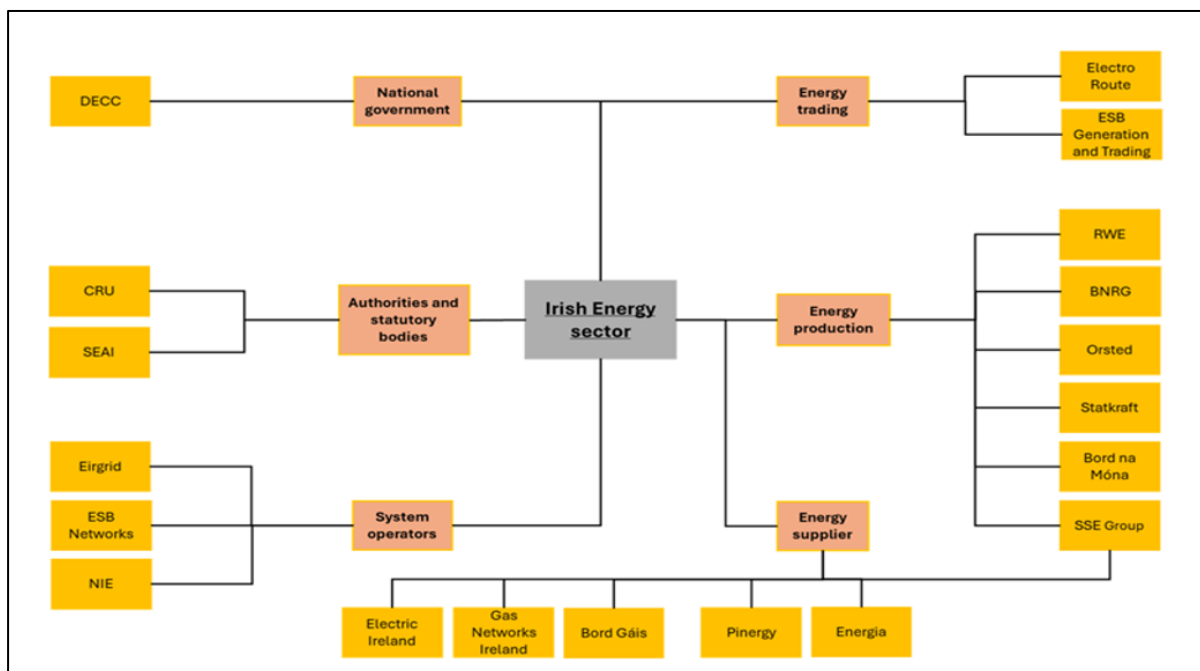


Table 1: List of Interview Respondents in REDIE Interview Sample

Interview respondent	Position	Sectoral segment
Interviewee 1	CEO	Energy Trader
Interviewee 2	Head of Offshore Wind	Energy Production
Interviewee 3	Head of EDI	Energy Production
Interviewee 4	General Manager	Energy Production
Interviewee 5	Head of Sustainability	Energy Production, Supply & Distribution
Interviewee 6	Head of Energy Services	Energy Supplier
Interviewee 7	HR Manager	Energy Production
Interviewee 8	Diversity and Inclusion Project Manager	Energy Supplier
Interviewee 9	Senior HR Lead	Energy Supplier
Interviewee 10	Senior Leader	Governance Agency
Interviewee 11	Inclusion Specialist	Energy Production, Supply & Distribution
Interviewee 12	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Lead	Energy Production, Supply & Distribution
Interviewee 13	CEO	Consultancy
Interviewee 14	HR & Operations Manager	Public Body
Interviewee 15	Programme Manager	Public Body
Interviewee 16	Head of HR	Public Body

While this report takes a comprehensive approach to EDI in senior leadership, there is a particular focus on women’s representation in key decision-making roles due to the nature of the data available. Within the international literature and interviews, there is extensive data that considers women’s representation in energy sector leadership, whereas references to improve equality and diversity in terms of ethnicity, race, and age in leadership are examined to a lesser extent.

1. UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE DECISION-MAKING IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Diverse perspectives, experiences and representation in decision-making positions have been shown to increase firms' financial performance, drive innovation, investment, and improve corporate social responsibilities (Lakhal et al, 2024; Bose et al, 2022; Marano et al., 2019).

The positive role of diverse decision-making was a key theme in the interviews. Embracing diverse thought was recognized for its benefits in fostering innovation and enhancing problem-solving capabilities. By drawing upon a range of perspectives, diversity was understood as driver of more effective and inclusive solutions:

“When we were set up as a startup... originally there were four guys and they were all engineers, they all studied in the kind of similar academic background, let's say a similar approach, and very quickly they realized they needed diversity to really make sure there weren't a huge amount of group think and they weren't kind of just operating with one set of assumptions.” – Interviewee 1

“I think it's so important when you think about the diversity in a room [...] that if everyone's thinking in the same way, with the same experience, the same lived experience, from the same background, you're going to only get one perspective.” - Interviewee 11

Some interviews acknowledged that the nature and challenges of the energy transition and wider climate action objectives made diverse decision-making a more pressing and necessary objective:

“Like I said at the outset, I think this is actually really important for the climate action because [...] these are huge challenges and we're not going to solve them by doing the same things we've done for the last 20 years. So, we really need a diversity of views and perspectives brought to the table and a diversity of experience as well” – Interviewee 9

To be honest, I've seen that's where the energy sector is at spiritually, you know, what you did before isn't necessarily going to be what's going to get you to the next stage of it. And part of that is bringing in new people, or allowing those people who are already here to actually get engaged and plugged in and contribute in a slightly different way.” – Interviewee 8

This emphasis on the benefits of diverse decision-making for more creative, innovative solutions and pathways for decarbonisation is also backed by numerous studies in the international literature. These studies posit that greater diversity in leadership roles can accelerate the transition to renewable energy, reduce carbon emissions and enhance financial performance (Kim and Hwang; Johnson et al, 2020; Abd Majid and Jaaffar, 2023).

This understanding of the benefits of EDI in decision-making by senior management can act as an enabler to address underrepresentation in leadership and the workforce.

“I always stated to organisations if the person comes to me, might be the HR person, or the D&I person. They're like, I really want to do this. We need to get our leaders to buy in. And I'd always say to them just book the half day leadership training because I guarantee you when they walk out of that room or leave that room, walk if able, but they will be saying, OK, we get this, like we get why we need to do this, what's next.” – Interviewee 11

The level of endorsement and understanding of the benefits of EDI within senior leadership is a crucial element for driving action and is explored in more detail in Section 5.

Specific studies on other aspects of diversity such as race and ethnicity at the top management level are scant in the literature and interviews. Within the interview sample, senior leaders made only two references to the level of diversity in their leadership team that did not mention gender:

“...and on the ethnicity piece, there's definitely ways to go on that.”
- **Interviewee 5**

“I suppose whether it's age, whether it's ethnicity, all the different backgrounds, we still have work to do”. – Interviewee 9

The overall lack of engagement or references to any specific actions to examine or directly address the lack of diversity of other demographics in senior leadership teams were apparent, demonstrating a clear prioritisation of gender diversity. It is positive that attention to and moves are being made to enhance gender diversity, however consideration of an enhancement of diversity across other social categories would be beneficial going forward.

2. EDI AT BOARD LEVEL

Energy company boards are essential to the advancement of the energy transition. They provide oversight and scrutiny of a firm's performance and advance the organisation's purpose through strategic planning. Numerous studies show that greater diversity at the Board level is linked with reductions in firms' carbon emissions, higher levels of green innovation, increased renewable energy consumption, and enhanced financial performance (Lakhal et al, 2024; Atif et al, 2021; Marano et al, 2019).

DRIVERS OF DIVERSITY: INVESTORS AND REGULATION

Board diversity, particularly board gender diversity, has become a prominent issue and objective for firms in recent years. Investment scrutiny provides a strong impetus to improve diversity, as noted by Interviewees 3 and 8:

“But my gut instinct on the reasons for setting those targets was a strong drive from the investment market” – Interviewee 3

“Equally, I think, there was a lot more scrutiny from shareholders in terms of your senior leadership composition and it started to become an investment issue.” – Interviewee 8

Depending on an organisation's regulatory or legislative obligations, they may be obliged to reach gender diversity targets and provide greater transparency in reporting efforts to promote EDI and enhance board effectiveness. For example, governance measures for gender balance on State Board membership in Ireland are outlined by the Department of Public Expenditure (2020).

Public, larger private firms and listed companies also face other legislative obligations, including board diversity reporting through the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), corporate due diligence duties and EU targets for gender balance of non-executive director positions.

“We've made great progress, like the CSRD, as much as we'll give out about how much work it is, it's a really positive step. Like it's a really, really good directive and we need more of that, the gender pay gap the same”. -Interviewee 9

The type and size of an organisation has influence on the external pressures or obligations to improve diversity. Smaller or private firms may not be required to report or set targets at the board level.

“[The regulator] views will dictate what we all have to do. And so, if they have no real clear plan or strategy that they can mandate, it means that it's up to the individual [energy] suppliers to make a decision of their own route. And yeah, that's not going to be the view beyond that from a commercial perspective [...] We don't expect to have a bigger board anytime soon and that would present an opportunity to broaden that piece out.” – Interviewee 6

Smaller or private firms may have less obligations and therefore less impetus to improve diversity at the Board level. Diversity targets and mandated reporting for smaller firms, proportional to their size, could be reported to the regulator or another body, and directly improve diversity levels. Smaller, regulated firms in the financial sector in the UK have become subject to mandatory reporting and the disclosure of their targets on the representation of women and ethnic minorities on their boards and executive management. If they cannot meet their obligations, they must explain why not (Financial Conduct Authority, 2022). This “comply or explain” mechanism is in recognition of the difficulties faced by smaller firms in implementing change quickly and provides more flexibility.

DECISION-MAKING POWER AND INFLUENCE

For diversity at board level to effectively impact decision-making, outcomes, and “trickle-down” diversity to the management of the company, critical mass theory suggests that a certain threshold of representation must be achieved before there can be significant impact. Existing literature posits that three or more of individuals from a demographic group must be represented in the board to impact firm-level outcomes (Biswas et al, 2023).

The REDIE project’s sample of senior leadership gender statistics (hereafter: REDIE gender statistics) shows women hold 39 per cent of board positions, while women in executive management account for 33 per cent of positions (Figure 2).

However, achieving a critical mass at the board level does not always accompany a critical mass in executive management. A recent report indicated that the utility sector in Ireland is one of the strongest sectors for women’s representation on boards, and yet also one of the weakest sectors for women’s representation on executive leadership teams (Balance for Better Business, 2023).

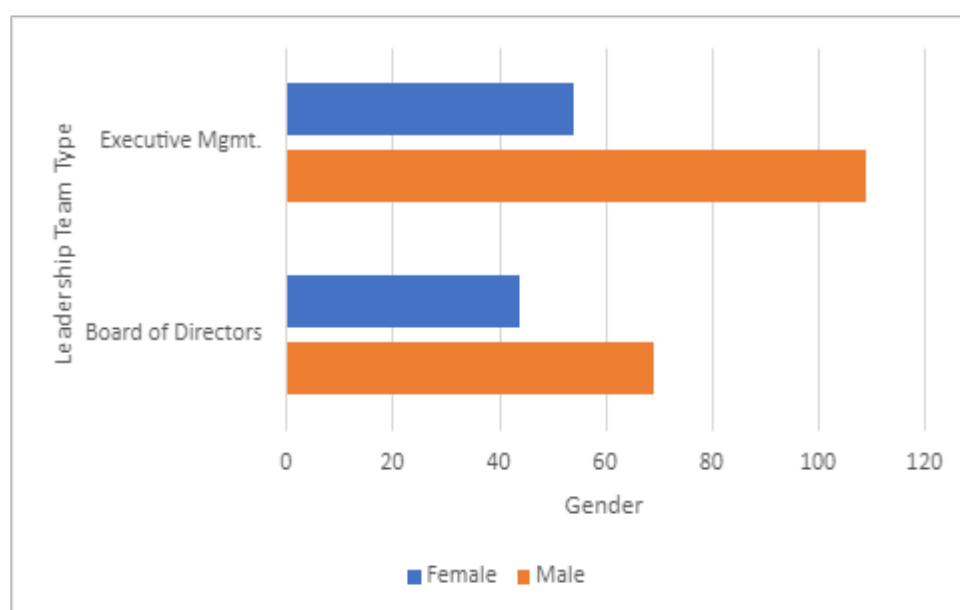


Figure 2: Gender distribution: Executive Management and Board of Directors

Other factors then are at play that influence board representation and firm-level diversity outcomes. Several studies highlight that women who are independent directors on boards are more responsive to social demands and more likely to positively affect women’s representation in senior management, compared to women in executive board positions (Biswas et al, 2023; Lakhal et al, 2024; Lin et al., 2023).

In addition, research indicates that women directors over 50 years of age who serve two terms or longer on the board are more likely to be engaged on diversity issues than younger women directors serving their first terms (Biswas et al, 2023).

Key decision-making roles within the board is an essential factor to achieving effective gender diversity, particularly positions such as Senior Independent Directors and Chairs (Better Balance for Business, 2023). In REDIE’s gender statistics, men hold significantly more Chair or Deputy Chair positions than women (Figure 3).

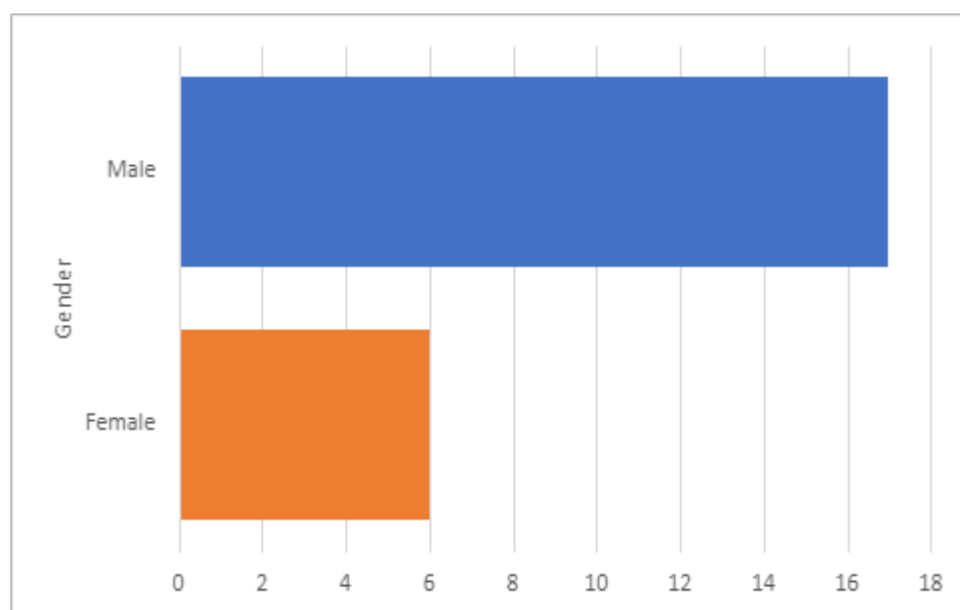


Figure 3: Gender breakdown of Chair/Deputy Chair positions on Board of Directors

Men occupy almost 74% of Chair, CEO or Deputy Chair positions while women’s representation in these roles is significantly lower, at 26%. This underscores the importance of the types of positions women hold at the board level.

While women may represent a critical mass of 39% at board level, they hold just over a quarter of the lead authority positions. The intersection of factors such as age and experience should also be considered, as they can affect women’s level of advocacy and ability to influence firms’ strategies and objectives.

3. EDI AT EXECUTIVE LEVEL

Gender diversity at the executive level is an under researched area in the academic literature compared to research on board gender diversity (Goldberg, 2016; Lakhal et al., 2024). Considering that the executive management team is responsible for implementing and operationalizing day-to-day strategies and policies, more attention to diverse and equal representation in key decision-making roles is crucial.

In functions such as finance, commercial, planning and operations, the REDIE gender statistics show that men largely represent these executive positions. In contrast, women are more likely to be occupy senior leadership positions in the Irish energy sector in areas such as HR, communications, governance and legal, which are less likely to be appointed as executive board roles (Balance for Better Business, 2023).

CEO AND TOP MANAGEMENT ROLES

The composition of CEO or equivalent top management roles in the REDIE gender statistics of senior leadership in the Irish energy sector is hugely male dominated at the executive level (Figure 3). Typically, the CEO has higher levels of direct control over companies' operations relative to their board and executive team.

This role is one of the most key decision-making positions in any firm, making it an important unit of analysis when examining equality, diversity and inclusion. The CEO can shape the overall balance of diversity within a given organisation or leadership team. Crucially, moreover, the CEO can open up the approach firms take in the energy transition to include broader and more diverse knowledge bases.

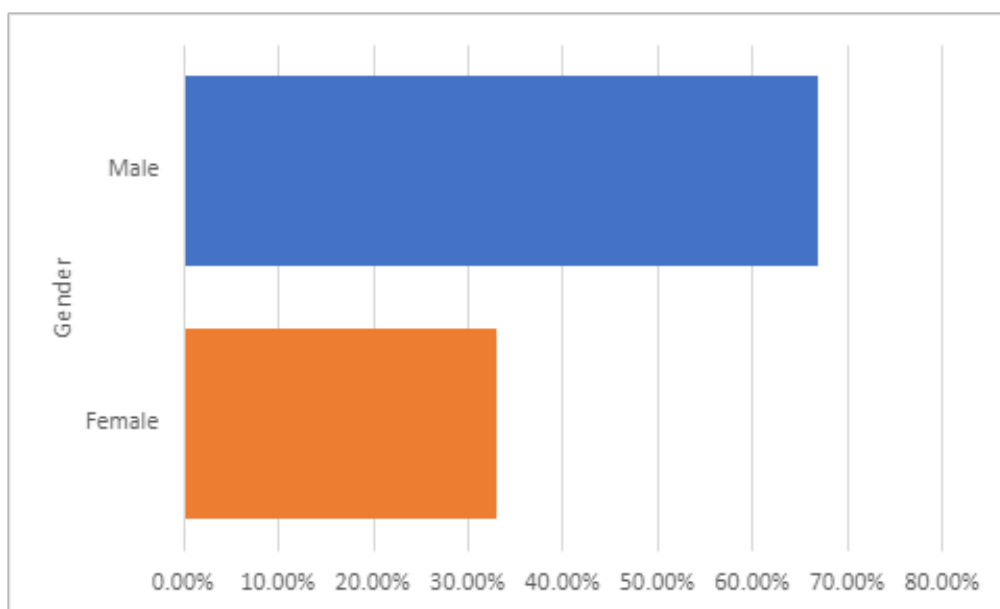


Figure 4: Percentage distribution of gender at Executive Management Level

Management structures and leadership hierarchies can also influence top management decision-making power in terms of representation and diverse thinking. In most firms, a single CEO serves as the highest-ranking executive. However, some organisations in the Irish sector showed a movement to multiple or joint CEO or equivalent top management positions.

“You're often weighing up a balance between, let's say, sustainability and security of supply, for example, or security of supply and cost. So, you want to have different perspectives brought to the table.” – Interviewee 10

The firms that have applied this co-leadership model express how it allows for multiple perspectives, and the ability to critique and balance out decision-making of a firms’ operations and strategies. This mechanism facilitates a less hierarchical decision-making process than is typical in most management structures and acts as an opportunity to enhance more effective representation and diverse decision-making at the highest level of authority in a firm.

FINANCIAL ROLES

The CFO is widely acknowledged to hold a critical role in terms of organisational strategy, performance, and financial and non-financial decisions for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Bose et al, 2022; Lakhal et al, 2024). In the REDIE gender statistics (Figure 5), 80% of financial executive roles in the Irish energy sector are occupied by men, which is a key factor in the context of decision-making in the energy transition.

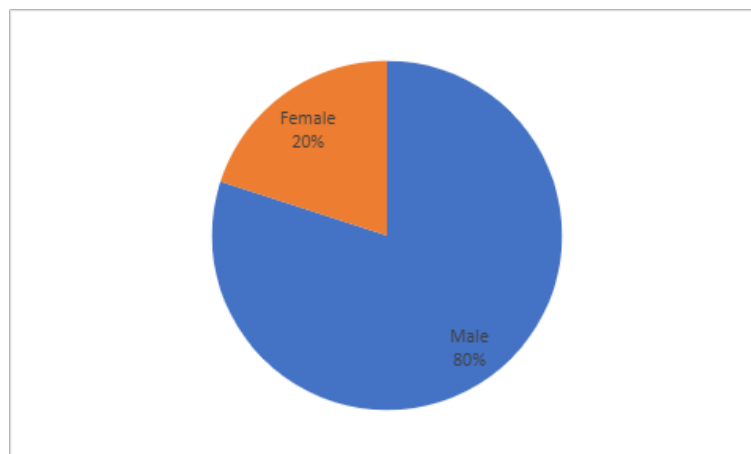


Figure 5: Gender breakdown of CFOs, Heads of Finance and Heads of Commercial at the Executive Team level

Both the literature and interviews highlight the lack of technical expertise and STEM-related expertise as crucial factors for the underrepresentation of women at senior leadership levels in the energy sector (Baruah and Gaudet, 2019; Arias et al, 2023; Taylor, 2015).

“The energy sector is a challenging sector to hire and because it's typically engineers who come into the space unfortunately, and the diversity within that space is pretty stark. And so, it's, you know, we only hire the people we hire, right, people who apply for the jobs, unfortunately.” – Interviewee 6

“I don’t think there’s an exclusion, I think it’s a supply issue if I’m being honest. I think the kind of technical skills particularly that we are looking for tend not to come in vast quantities of... If you don’t have a lot of civil engineers coming in, chances are you may not in 10-15 years’ time have a whole lot of female “Head of Technical Engineering” or “Head of Asset Management” or “Head of” anything.” – Interviewee 8

However, senior leadership positions in financial roles, including “Head of Asset Management”, as referenced by Interviewee 8, do not require STEM-related qualifications. Yet, women occupy only 20 per cent of these financial leadership positions (Figure 5).

Therefore, interventions within STEM are a vital factor but cannot fully explain disparities within the overall gender balance of organisations. As such, there is a need to account for wider and longstanding cultural and structural barriers to women within the energy sector.

There are opportunities to diversify and achieve more equal representation in senior leadership across non-STEM, as well as the technical roles. Given the importance of CFO decision-making roles in a firm, enhancing EDI at this level should be a key focus in succession planning. It is crucial to address and examine the barriers to representation to ensure an inclusive approach.

SOFT VERSUS HARD ROLES

Business roles in finance, engineering, and operations are often classified as ‘core operations’ or ‘hard’ functions, while HR, legal and governance roles are categorised as ‘business support’ or ‘soft’ functions (Das et al, 2019; Taylor 2015).

Within the interviews, there was a wide recognition of the tendency towards gendered divisions of labour at the leadership level within these soft versus hard roles. Interviewees 4 and 8 noted how these gendered differences were a central feature of their organisation’s leadership structure.

“I have been working in renewables for good few years now, and you’ll always see a lot of women in HR, in legal, in consenting, those planning roles. Whereas actually when it comes to the more engineering and commercial roles, you don’t see as many, you start to see it less, and so maybe the challenge there is to make sure that younger engineers coming up, that they’re encouraged into those management roles if they want to.” - Interviewee 4

“Now, they’re coming from, I won’t say your “traditional, female-type” roles, one is a People Director, and our Strategy and Regulation areas, but they’re not in our Engineering and the “technical” disciplines that we have. But I mean, that’s pretty good and the senior management layer below that; we’re light but we’re not dramatically light.” - Interviewee 8

Technical Functions:

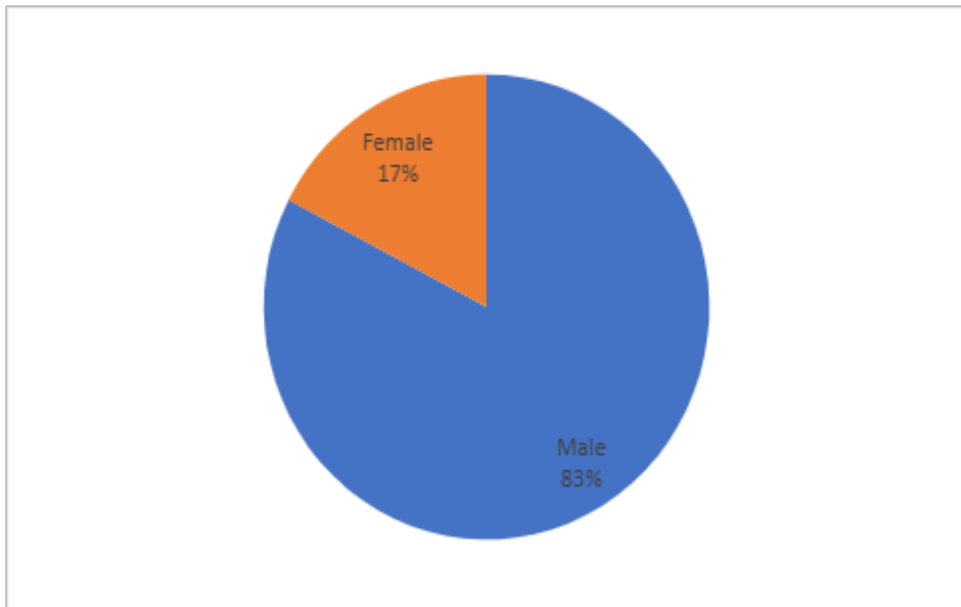


Figure 6: Gender breakdown of 'Technical' functions that include Engineering, Infrastructure, Technologies and IT roles at the Executive Team level

Planning and Operations:

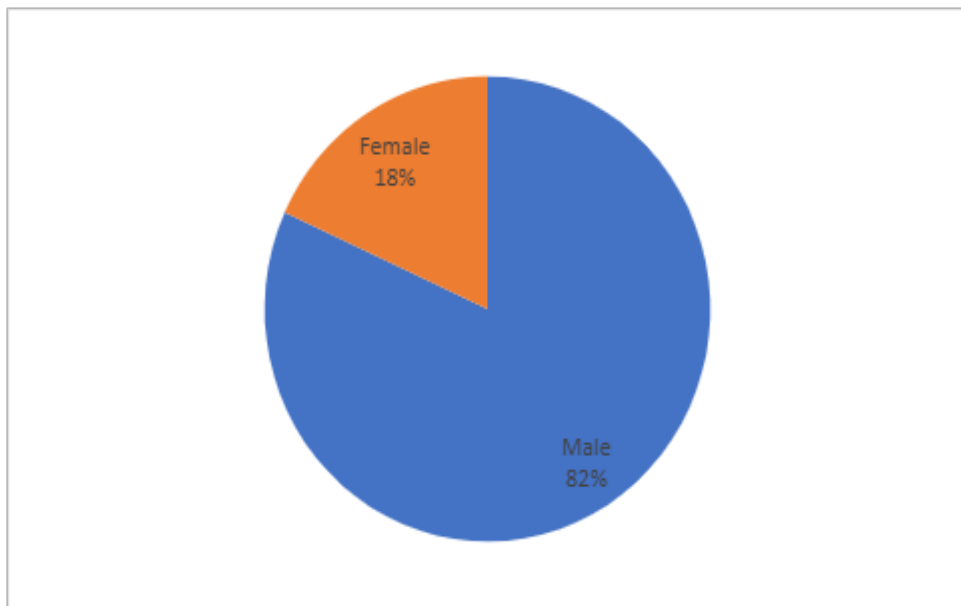


Figure 7: Gender breakdown of 'Planning and Operations' functions that include Planning, Strategy, Innovation, Development, Operations, Transport roles at the Executive level.

Customers/Consumers/Enterprise:

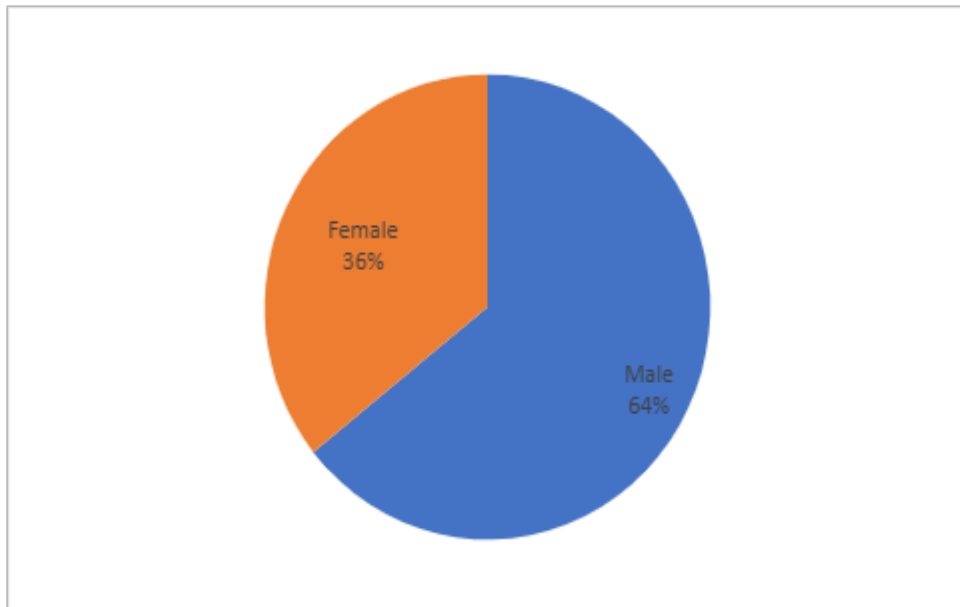


Figure 8: Gender breakdown of 'Customers/Consumers/Enterprise' functions at the Executive level.

Governance and Policy:

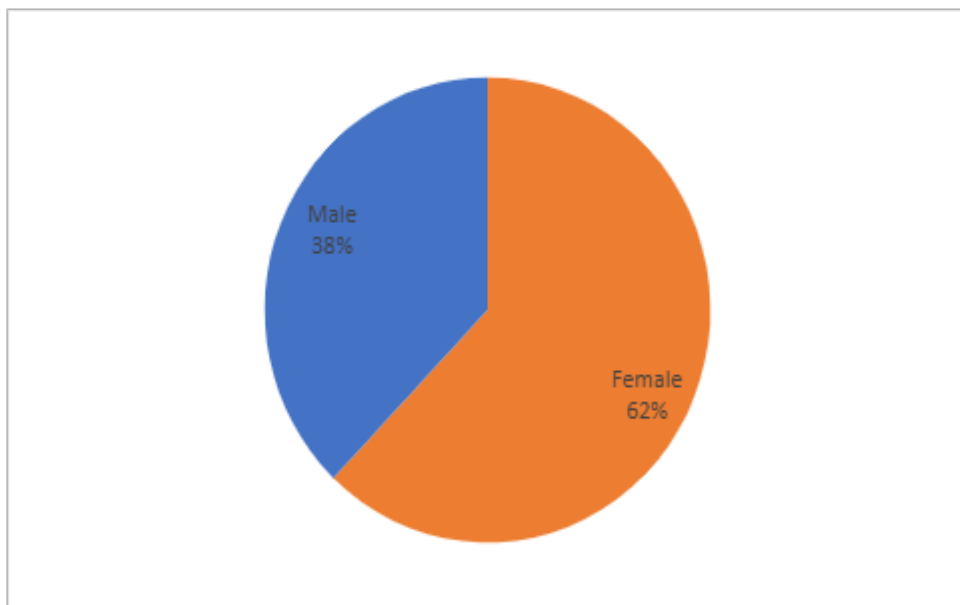


Figure 9: Gender breakdown of 'Governance and Policy' functions, including Corporate Affairs, General Counsel, Legal, Regulatory, Company Secretary, Sustainability and Policy

People, HR and Communications

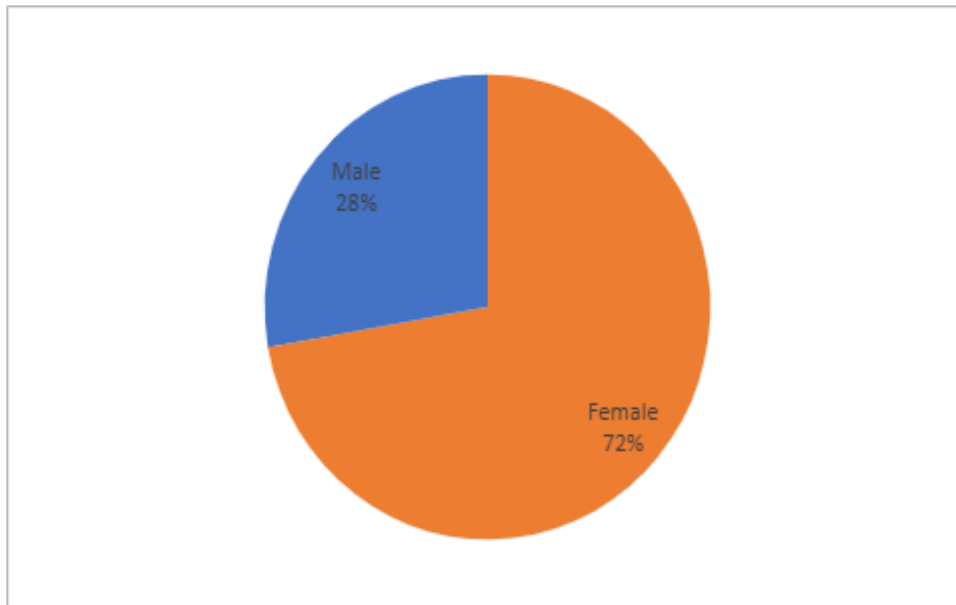


Figure 10: Gender breakdown of 'People/HR and Communications' functions at the Executive level.

As demonstrated in the charts above, the executive functions within the Irish energy sector display clear gendered segregation. Men predominantly lead technical, planning and operations, and customer and enterprise roles while women are more commonly found in HR, communications, legal, governance and regulatory executive positions.

A factor underlying the dynamics of restructuring within Ireland's energy sector relates to the changing contours of soft versus hard roles within the energy industry as it decarbonises, and functions such as regulatory and sustainability become more critical to business operations.

In terms of decision-making power and enabling diverse thinking for the energy transition, core or business support leadership roles may have varying weights of influence in shaping the energy transition due to historic approaches and ideologies.

This segregation can perpetuate a technocratic direction in the energy sector, potentially excluding diverse perspectives in decision making and favour a narrow knowledge base of a relatively homogenous cohort of people (Lieu et al, 2020).

Both technical and social functions are necessary for the energy transition, and efforts to diversify and create more collaboration across would enable more equal representation in decision-making roles.

As observed in one interview:

"I think part of what happened was that as it starts going beyond things that are just technical challenges and as they become more policy and legal and regulatory and market challenges, we started getting more economists and lawyers and policy ones or whatever, you know."

So, you had a bit more diversity and sort of groups, but you'd still find if you were sitting with the group in some of these conferences that the women are there, there are not enough women engineers, for example, they're on what people might call the "soft skills" side of the transition, which is also needed.

It's just you'd like to see some of the interaction between the different disciplines, because if you're trying to engineer solutions, you need to engineer solutions for humans, you know, of which there's so many different experiences." – **Interviewee 10**

Firms have an opportunity to examine and restructure strategic decision-making roles at the executive level. The energy transition and the changing nature of international markets have meant some firms are beginning to create new C-suite positions, such as a "Chief Sustainability Officer" or "Chief Diversity Officer", in recognition of the evolving economic and social landscape.

"I suppose in terms of kind of a structure, not every company has their CSO as close to the CEO, it's moving more like that. But we've had that structure in place for a number of years, when some companies didn't even have a CSO." – **Interviewee 5**

The assessment of key decision-making roles within firms, including the level of diversity within specific business units, examining hierarchical management structures, and reconsidering the decision-making weight of 'soft' and 'hard' functions in a changing industry can enable more effective and equal leadership in the energy transition.

4. BARRIERS TO KEY DECISION-MAKING ROLES

The examination of the current composition and trends in Board and Executive senior leadership within the Irish energy sector has revealed various structural, technical, and organizational dynamics that limit EDI in key decision-making roles. Through interviews with senior leaders and EDI experts in the Irish energy sector, further insights into the major barriers to diverse and equal representation at leadership level are observed and are backed by similar findings in the international literature.

DRIVE FROM TOP MANAGEMENT

In firms that began with low levels of diversity in leadership and the workforce, the concerted efforts of board and executive leaders have been identified as critical drivers of change. Many interviewees referenced the specific interests or actions taken by the Board, CEO or other Executive members to tackle diversity or inequality at the leadership level.

In the same vein, apathy or limited engagement of senior leadership of EDI can be a substantial barrier to the advancement and pace of change of diversity in key decision-making roles. A lack of understanding of systemic challenges faced by underrepresented groups in reaching executive or board positions, or the real benefits of diverse decision-making, can lead to insufficient support or meaningful action in this space, beyond endorsement of entry or mid-level pipeline initiatives through HR and other softer approaches.

This is evidenced in multiple interviews with EDI experts:

“But we're not addressing the elephant in the room, which is actually the organizational structure and setup doesn't work for everybody. And I think the light bulb has gone off for some of our leadership as well because they'll be like "Ohh, well women should apply, or women should do this, or women should do that." But, when they see some of their pipeline and they kind of see some of this pyramid, well, don't tell me, you know, we've had the entry level 50:50 rule for however many long years now and we know we get really talented people. So why is that pyramid still going like this? And then I think some eyes get opened on OK. Yeah, maybe it's an organizational system issue and it's not an individual people issue.” – Interviewee 3

“You need the leaders to get what this is about, why they're doing it and really be on board for the agendas, they move it forward.” – Interviewee 11

By the same token, apathy or lack of saliency of the needs of diverse decision-making by senior leadership can mean that direct action to diversify key decision-making roles is not prioritised.

“I don't think there's any, there's no kind of, let's call it “proactive engagement” to promote things. I think it's a general understanding that we're quite a flat structure within the business and everybody's doors open and everybody's desk is available, and it doesn't seem to be an issue to be, to be honest. I don't hear at any of the senior team meetings that have posed an issue and so we haven't had any, but we don't really don't have any issues, to be honest.” – Interviewee 6

In the case of this firm, there was low female representation on its executive team, and board. The organisation's lack of diversity in decision-making roles was not considered an impediment by leadership and actions to improve diversity levels was concentrated at lower or entry-level positions.

EDUCATION AND UPSKILLING

As previously noted, the level of technical and STEM-related qualifications is referred to as a major limiting factor for the level of diverse representation at senior leadership level.

“There might be department head changes, etcetera, but you're still looking for a particular profile of hire and at a time and place to get that kind of profile, there may not have been enough diversity within the educational base to get that level” – Interviewee 6

Throughout the interviews, initiatives or observed changes in diversity were referenced in terms of education and technical skill from pipelines of incoming graduates and apprentices. The interview extract above demonstrates how pipelines at these levels do not yet currently translate into a base or pool for senior leadership hires or changes.

Often, the discourse for STEM training and targeted interventions are focused at entry-level and younger workers. Senior or experienced workers in other areas of the firm or outside the sector are rarely considered for “cross-skilling” or “upskilling” initiatives, to the same degree (Taylor, 2015). This is a missed opportunity to engage experienced workers in the industry (or those outside the industry) who come from non-traditional backgrounds and can provide a larger talent pool for leadership and decision-making roles.

Even with the necessary qualifications, the academic literature shows that women at senior levels in STEM and energy-related industries find there are obstacles to executive leadership roles, as they are usually ‘stuck’ in roles out of the promotional track (Taylor, 2015). Social norms may limit people in senior management to acquire highly visible and mission-critical projects and international assignments, placing them on a lower career trajectory (Das et al, 2019; Taylor, 2015).

Intersectional factors such as race and ethnicity can manifest further barriers and limitations due to social and cultural biases. A study of the renewable energy sector in the US identified that women of colour felt they required higher evidence of competency compared to white women and did not have equivalent professional networks for

promotions (Baruah, 2022). These dynamics also need to be considered for enhancing EDI within energy sector organisations and the energy transition more broadly.

CARE-GIVING ROLES AND FLEXIBILITY

The role of caregiving and levels of required flexibility was the most cited reasons for a lack of EDI in senior leadership in the interviews.

“Because, let's be honest, most women you know, are also, and I'm not going to say all of them, but a lot of them are maybe the main carers and they might be the people that are, you know, providing the most support from a family perspective.” – Interviewee 7

“Most of the women that applied [a role that previously had few women] had been working there 18-19 years and all through that time had other caring responsibilities that weren't in a position to be able to go for promotion. But at that point, they kind of all hit, all their kids were grown up. They didn't have the responsibility, so they could commit to that level that didn't offer the same flexibility as the lower. So, they all ended up getting that job at the same time, but it's like, why did they have to wait? Why couldn't the organisation have created some sort of flexibility at an earlier level to draw from that talent?” – Interviewee 13

Caregiving may be a wider societal issue, but corporate policies such as blended working and parental leave allow for greater flexibility and provide multiple options for firms to exercise change. Recognition of caregiving responsibilities and providing a culture of flexibility was regarded as an essential enabler for more women in senior leadership and provided positive impacts for men and others with caring responsibilities.

“But we wanted to make it equal for the dads as well, so it's not just that the females are taking that time off from work, but encouraging the dads to take time off as well, because they generally didn't, they barely took their paternity leave, never mind taking parental leave... It's really facilitated and just creates this kind of balance, you know, an even playing field across, so it's not just the female staff who are taking time off. It's the male staff as well. And I think they're really valuing it in terms of retention as well.” – Interviewee 13

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Examination of EDI in leadership must go beyond gender

Throughout the literature and interviews, the underrepresentation of women in leadership in the energy sector is the major issue that is discussed and that has targeted efforts in place. Gender equality and diversity are important issues to address, as women represent half the population and almost half the workforce but are largely underrepresented in the energy sector and its leadership.

However, a narrow focus on only one aspect of diversity is problematic and means that the consideration, understanding and monitoring of other excluded social groups in senior leadership in the energy sector in Ireland is deeply underprioritized, or known.

Furthermore, treating gender as a binary concept of men and women fails to appreciate the heterogeneity of both sexes and the impact of intersectional inequalities such as age, race and socioeconomic backgrounds on their experiences. Firms need to examine EDI in their senior leadership in a broader sense, applying an intersectional lens where possible.

2. Targeted and effective representation is required in key decision-making roles

When addressing equality and diversity in leadership to enable diverse decision-making, representation should be substantive and effective, rather than descriptive. Achieving a critical mass of underrepresented groups at the board or executive level may not be sufficient in practice, as the literature shows how different positions in leadership matters.

Intersecting dynamics such as age and years of experience may impact the ability to influence decision-making. Targets and succession planning to increase diverse representation in Senior Director, Chair, CEO and CFO roles should be considered, to enable more diverse thought and capacity for action in strategic decision-making roles.

3. Organisational hierarchies can influence decision-making ability

Organisational structures and management hierarchies can greatly influence diversity levels in the executive. Consideration of alternative models for top management such as joint or multiple CEO models can allow for more diverse decision-making and representation at the highest operational level. Restructuring executive management C-Suite positions to include new roles that are important for the energy transition, such as a Chief Diversity Officer, or Chief Sustainability Officer can further facilitate more diverse decision-making.

4. Diversification of leadership is needed across business functions

Equality and diversity in leadership of “hard” and “soft” functions should also be considered and examined in terms of their weight in decision-making power for the energy transition, particularly as these leadership roles tend to have gender-based divisions. Greater collaboration among functions can enhance innovative solutions and

thinking. Initiatives to diversify at the business function level, rather than purely the leadership level, may lead to more equal representation in executive leadership.

5. Accountability and action of senior leadership is critical

Action from the top-down is a key enabler of greater equality and diversity in senior leadership. Leadership should be more accountable for driving EDI strategies, including through thoughtful succession planning and setting targets at the business unit levels to help tackle gender-based segregation across functions and their leadership. Targets linked to senior executive performance at the business function level can act as an effective mechanism for executive engagement and accountability.

6. Cross-functional upskilling and flexibility

Firms' efforts and solutions to increase representation in technical occupations of the energy sector are highly concentrated in entry-level and apprenticeship roles. In order to increase a more diverse supply of technical candidates at the executive level, there are opportunities to re-train or upskill workers in different functions or from different industries at the middle and upper management levels. Structural barriers must also be acknowledged, as obstacles to senior leadership can persist for underrepresented groups, despite having the necessary qualifications.

Workplace flexibility is identified as crucial for women to obtain realistic pathways to senior leadership. More generous parental leave, flexible hours and a culture that supports the taking of these policies in practice can foster a more inclusive environment across various demographics in the organisation.

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