



**ABU DHABI**  
SUSTAINABILITY WEEK

GENDER DIVERSITY  
**VITAL DRIVER  
OF SUSTAINABLE  
RECOVERY**



## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only disrupted all sectors around the world, but it has also threatened to reverse the important gains that have been made in the last decade within the context of gender equality, as the negative impacts of the pandemic were disproportionately felt by women and girls alike. Such an impact on half of the world's population cannot be ignored and changes in policy and mindset are urgently needed today.



In March 2021, ADSW gathered global leaders from government, business and industry to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the workplace. As the world continues to work on delivering a green recovery and celebrate the

achievements of women, a key topic during the discussions focused on gender diversity as a result of the pandemic, and how renewable energy is playing a massive role in gender equality in the developing world.

## ADSW Web Series, March 2021

In the fifth episode of the ADSW Web Series, "The Central Role of Gender Diversity in Driving a Sustainable Recovery", Gauri Singh, Deputy Director-General of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), spoke of the disproportionate impact of natural disasters or economic crises on women. Women make up 70% of health workers globally and they have been on the frontline of the fence in terms of caregiving. IRENA analysis has also shown us that women provide 75% of the world's unpaid care, such as

looking after children, the elderly and the sick. "So in terms of the workforce, women are likely to be employed in temporary positions or being self-employed," she explained. "If the enterprise falters, they are the first ones to be retrenched. This implies that women experience a greater insecurity, which gets worsened by the gender pay gap so, now more than ever, it is time to ensure the response to this outbreak and the 'building back better' is gender sensitive."



### Gauri Singh

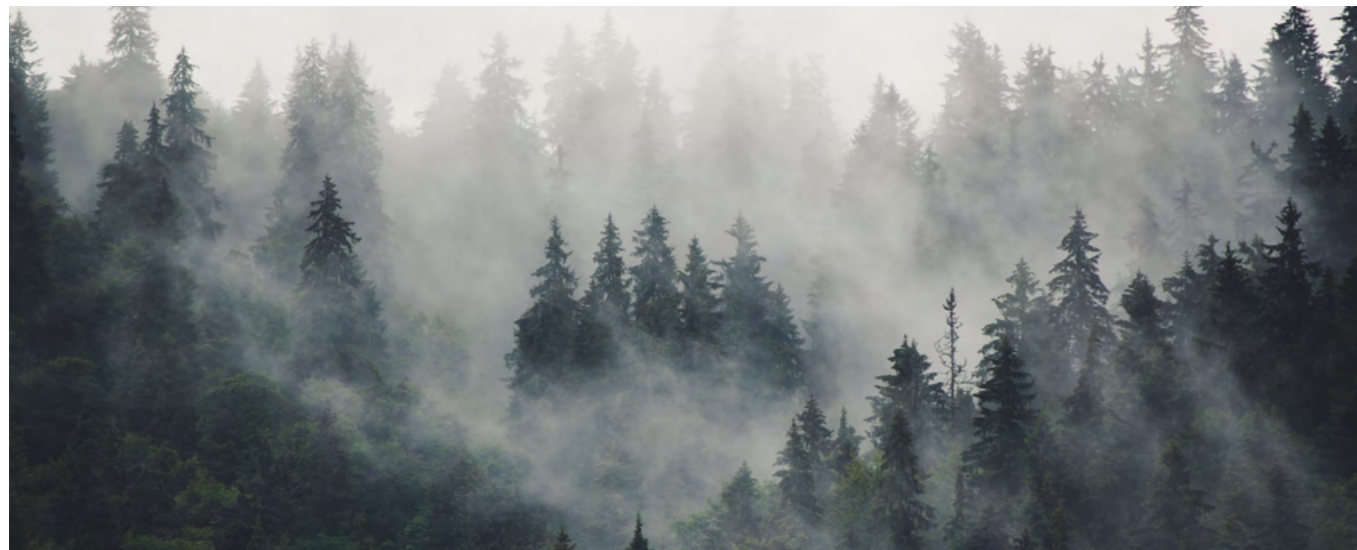
Deputy Director-General of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)

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The **30** countries that have committed to carbon neutrality represent **70%** of the emissions, which shows a clear sign that the energy transition is unstoppable, and the financial shift is following suit. The oil and gas sector employs **22%** of women compared to **32%** in renewable energy, and the pandemic has opened up flexibility in terms of remote work. Although this provides a glimmer of hope, Singh believes the shift towards a gender-sensitive response will not happen automatically. "It has to be worked on and that is very critical," she added.

For the world to achieve access to energy – which is paramount to reaching all the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the movement towards lifting women and their families out of energy poverty will be crucial. However, with a rise in work from home, the pandemic has exacerbated exposure to indoor air pollution and energy poverty. "We need to ensure we are embracing the voices of those women directly impacted as we think of solutions," said Dymphna van der Lans, CEO of the Clean Cooking Alliance. "It has been really difficult, but we have also seen so much



resilience on the side of women as the head of their family but also as entrepreneurs, innovators, and people who think carefully about policy making. We see strong leadership from women as leaders of their companies, communities but also of policy, that we should all take inspiration from and look towards as we look collectively to build back stronger.”

According to PwC’s Women in Work 2021 Index, which looks at the impact of COVID-19 on women and their jobs and opportunities compared to men, women are already starting from a disadvantage in the labour market. From higher unemployment, lower participation

and the gender pay gap, to working in more precarious jobs and a lower proportion of full-time employment, women’s jobs were found to generally be more vulnerable in times of economic downturn. “But COVID-19 is hitting harder and faster,” explained Larice Stielow, Senior Economist at PwC. “Those who are the most vulnerable in society, working in lower paid roles, in contact intensive service sectors, like accommodation, food services, the arts, entertainment and recreation, are the sectors that have been largely shut down by COVID lockdowns, and the labour force in these sectors is disproportionately female.”



**Larice Stielow**  
Senior Economist at PwC



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She mentioned data from multiple countries where more women than men have lost jobs and been furloughed. Another point she highlighted is that the pandemic amplified pre-existing gender equalities around the amount of unpaid care and domestic work that women do across the world. Such data has shown that more women than men have left the workforce because of additional caring respon-

sibilities. “If that becomes a permanent effect, that is a real worry because the higher this burden on women lasts, the more women will leave the workforce permanently, as do the implications for women’s participation in the workforce for gender equality and for economic growth,” she added. “The response to the pandemic needs to be gender sensitive.”



Today, **2.3 billion** people still lack access to clean cooking, a figure van der Lans found unacceptable in this day and age, calling on the need to address the issue. With increased work from home, men are now exposed to the problem, taking notice of the impact on their families’ health. As a result, clean cooking solutions are being purchased, leading a change in mindset and awareness. “This is about shifting the narrative,” she noted. “If governments implement these policies, they will see the financial and physical gains that they will get from it, in the reduction of healthcare costs. This needs to be incorporated in that calculation at a policymaking level.”

In order to undo the damage caused by COVID-19 to women in work, even by 2030, the PwC report found that progress towards gender equality needs to be twice as fast as its historical rate. For Stielow, achieving those rates will be unlikely, although care can be redistributed. This includes equal paid parental leave, as it is estimated the unpaid work of women is worth **US\$10 trillion** to the global economy every year. “The first step is to recognise the value to society,” she said. “The second step is looking at policies that can redistribute that care. This policy will go a long way to improving equality across all employment metrics.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS



**Singh:** The global energy transition is to drive sustainable growth and development. It needs to be inclusive in every sense. So if we were to look at establishing gender as a pillar of the energy strategies at the national and global levels, it would definitely produce a much swifter and a more inclusive transition, while also accelerating the achievement of the SDGs. Advancing equality and diversity in the energy sector is a compelling proposition, rather than a zero-sum game. There is a need to look at the barriers, and the policies and the strategies must have a clear pathway of addressing them, if we are to make the energy transition more inclusive.



**Stielow:** It is important that some of these changes that we need are private sector-led, and we help to change the minds of governments as we go along. We have a responsibility to lead the way, to be ahead of governments, and to help other private sector firms get better towards gender equality. Some groups in the United Kingdom analyse policies through a gender lens and provide economic analysis to governments and policymakers to show both the gendered impacts of policy decisions and budgets, and the effects on other marginalised groups. The more data that we can bring into the analysis and the conversation will really support change.



**Van der Lans:** I have been really inspired, this year particularly with COVID-19, by the resiliency that women have shown within the companies and the policymakers that we work with. There is a deep ability to remain grounded in the work that they know needs doing, and then the flexibility to find innovations in business models to adjust to new circumstances. For us to continue to highlight and elevate those voices and share those out, there is so much power that comes with that narrative and strong voices or even just an aggregation of many voices. That has been really inspiring to me and so I continue to look for that agility, that resiliency and that groundedness – we know what needs doing.



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