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BUSINESS

Reporter's Notebook: What I Learned From an All-Women Conference at Europe's Largest Energy Trade Fair

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The Women Energize Women conference takes place on June 15 at the International Congress Center in Munich, Germany. Photo: Women Energize Women conference

After showing my reporter's ID to a staff member, I stepped into Munich's International Congress Center. As I prepared to get to work chasing interviews and nailing down stories, hot energy topics of the day that would need to be covered cycled through my still slightly jet-lagged brain.

It was the second day of The smarter E Europe — Europe's largest energy

early morning until 6 p.m. That meant lots of people, speeches and issues to cover, a typical busy day at a major international conference.

But amid the bustling crowds I was greeted by an unusual sight: Of the nearly 100 people gathered in the conference room, all were women – a first for me.

It was the Women Energize Women conference, a side event of the trade fair jointly organized by The German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the German Renewable Energy Federation (BEE), with the goal of driving increased female participation in the global energy transition.



Sandra Retzer, director of project and administrative services for international cooperation at GIZ, speaks at the conference. Photo: Women Energize Women conference

Speakers specializing in energy investment, financing and consulting took the stage to share their life experiences on how they have thrived in what are often viewed as male-dominated industries.

I was in Munich primarily to report on trends and issues in the global energy sector, but it was the focus on women working in this field that captured my attention.

“I’ve been working in the renewable energy industry for many, many years, I’m
about 50, but still I feel like I’m in the same position as I was 10 years ago.” said

Sandra Retzer, director of international cooperation programs and administrative Services at the GIZ.

“Of course, that changed from country to country. But I remember once I was sitting in Japan in front of 500 men, and I was the only woman,” she recalled, her words brimming with emotion. “So, I see today there are a lot more women, but I want to see more.”

As a young woman reporter in China, I can personally attest to the underrepresentation of woman in the traditional energy sector. This manifests itself in some areas by the outright prohibition on women going down the coal mines out of superstition that it will bring bad luck. Elsewhere, it might be the lack of women's changing rooms at some work sites.

More often than not, I am reminded of this fact in an inconspicuous, but omnipresent way. For example, when attending industry conferences, I sometimes struggle to find a table with a woman on it.

A 2019 report by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) shows that while 48% of the global labor force is female, women only account for 22% of the workforce in the traditional energy industry, and nearly a third in the renewable sector.

“We are seeing that young women don't have the stereotypes that often exist in our generation, and they have a much more open mind when it comes to making choices and entering what is traditionally viewed as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) sectors,” said Gauri Singh, deputy director general of IRENA, at the conference.



The conference provided a stage for 39 renewables experts from 18 countries that were exclusively women, and spotlighted their important role in the energy transition. Photo: Women Energize Women conference

She pointed out that there are 12.7 million people working in the renewables energy sector, with that number expected to quadruple by 2050. This means there are many more opportunities not just to contribute to the new energy transition, but also be a part of this very futuristic sector that's going to change all of our lives.

In general, the most effective models for achieving gender equity are frequently top-down, Retzer said. For example, some countries have policies requiring a certain percentage of women on management teams. To achieve these goals, companies are forced to make changes.

But energy is a very diverse industry, and everyone should be involved, that's why more forums and conversations are needed to raise awareness and create bottom-up initiatives and changes, she said.

The hours-long sharing of experiences and encouragement from the guests on stage was undoubtedly heartening. Walking out of the exhibition hall, the cool evening air calmed my heightened emotions.

A comment by a young woman at an energy consulting firm with whom I

all the excitement in there, there are still just as many problems to face when we get back to reality.”

“I came to Germany for a week’s business trip, and my husband feels that his burden of taking care of the kids has become heavier,” she said.

That said, creating awareness is the first step to generating action. As the deputy prime minister of Samoa, Fiame Naomi Mata’afa once said, “Gender equality is about social attitude. If this doesn’t change, nothing will move on.”

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