



WOMEN MAKING



Women are making steady progress in the downstream sector, and some of them, despite facing several challenges, have created a niche space for themselves in the industry



Traditionally, downstream sectors have been considered male-dominated arenas, and companies operating in the segment have shied away from hiring women for the majority of roles, citing everything from non-availability of qualified candidates to non-conducive work environments.

However, in the past 15 years, companies struggling with skill and

talent shortages have hired more women. Simultaneously, pressure from the general public on diversity, inclusion, and social accountability forced them to change their recruitment policies to create more space for women in the workforce.

In the Middle East, women started making inroads in refining and petrochemicals as a result of the efforts taken by authorities to employ local youth,

chiefly as a part of their nationalisation programmes.

According to a report by EY, over the last 20 years, an increasing number of women have joined the petrochemicals industry, but they still only make up 22-23% of the total workforce, indicating there is still a need to do more.

Some of them, who were among the first to join the industry, overcame hurdles to achieve great success in their respective fields and become role models for others to follow.

Recently, Refining and Petrochemicals Middle East organized a virtual roundtable discussion with leading downstream companies to discuss the experience of such women.

Benefits of gender diversity

Industry experts, who participated in the event, argue promoting gender diversity benefits companies in many ways including organisational performance, improved problem-solving, and better creativity, and lower-risk decision-making.

Gentry Brann, senior vice president of people, culture, and communications at McDermott said there are strong business reasons why it makes sense to have more diversity in the workforce.

She noted various studies which have shown that a more diverse team often leads to better decision-making at the organisation level, and that greater diversity also results in more effective problem-solving, and increases the potential for innovation, innovative thinking, and creativity. She adds that these factors are critical to the future growth of the downstream industry.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNPD) in its 2018 report on sustainability and human development, recommended that women should account for at least one-third of the total workforce employed in any sector. The female workforce share in the global downstream industry is well below 33%.

As per the UNDP report companies having at least one-third female employees tend to perform better on ESG parameters.

A diverse workforce can deliver more innovative solutions to improve efficiency and long-term profitability, various researches have shown, and hence the trend to hire more women has gathered momentum in recent times.”

“We must get better at bridging the

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Ghiya Al-Haj-Hasan, senior director of strategic accounts at Honeywell

gender gap,” says Shatha Al-Shammari, HR business partner at SABIC. “And we need to increase the number of women employees.

But we also need more firsts, which take commitment on our part, and we need to candidly address barriers, perceive that they might be real, and mutually create solutions to overcome them.”

Diversity in technology companies

Technology companies were the first ones to follow the trend by recruiting more female candidates, particularly in inducting fresh talents from schools, colleges, or universities, the EY report said.

Ghiya Al-Haj-Hasan, senior director of strategic accounts at Honeywell, says, “Honeywell has talent management to

make sure that women have advancement programs to equip them with training and development opportunities, expanding their internal networks for promotional opportunities.

“And of course, there is branding and communication showcasing Honeywell’s commitment to inclusion and diversity to ensure Honeywell attracts and retains these diverse talents.”

She adds, “Training and toolkits are provided to hiring managers to reinforce their role in bringing diverse talent into Honeywell.”

First in the respective fields

Women joined the downstream industry even 10 or 15 years ago were often the first females to take up their given position, and

they had to work hard to prove competencies and counter prejudices against them.

“When I joined SABIC in 2014, I was part of the first batch of female employees in the company in Saudi Arabia’s eastern province,” says Shatha Al-Shammari, HR business partner, SABIC.

A graduate of Jubail University College, Al-Shammari has led several HR projects and initiatives that touch on employee welfare, work-life balance, and strategic priorities. She is also the chairperson of the SABIC Young Leadership Council, which is sponsored by the SABIC CEO, the regional MEA lead for SHE, which is a network for women at SABIC, and Al-Shammari is also a company representative at the Pearl Initiative.

Research carried out by McKinsey shows that getting their first promotion is a challenge for women in many industries, and that obstacle is magnified in the oil and gas, chemical, and petrochemicals industries. Female participation in the downstream industry declines by 31% from entry-level roles to management roles.

“One of the things we must do is when we have the first female employee, it is not enough for a company to just promote someone of a different background or woman or diversity candidate into a role,” says Brann. “But it is really important that we make sure we have the right support network for them. And I think that is where companies fail a lot of the time.”

She explains that she was the first woman in specific roles at many points in her career, and it is not always easy.

“One of the things that we have done in the company is the empowerment of employees’ resource groups,” she explains.

“We have a global women’s network, we have parents at work, employee resource groups, we have many others as well. We have a McDermott Black Alliance, that focuses with our black employees in the US in particular, we are expanding that more globally, we have all kinds of employee resource groups that are very much about affinity groups, and networking and connection.”

Diversity crucial to the sustainability

Nearly all the participants of the roundtable event noted that gender diversity in the downstream industry is important for companies trying to achieve net-zero

emissions. To achieve such ambitious emissions targets in the next few years, companies need innovative and out-of-the-box solutions to bring change to production processes and other activities.

A diverse management team reaps advantages as diversity can help them think differently by bringing together different perspectives and viewpoints to develop creative solutions.

Al-Haj-Hasan says it took us about 100 years to carbonise, so if the world aims to to decarbonise in the next 25 to 30 years, it has to be done at four times the pace. So achieving net zero is a journey, and a lot of work has to be put in.

“...This is a new problem... we need to have different thoughts and different ways of thinking to be able to address them,” says Al-Haj-Hasan, explaining the importance of diverse thinking in organisations.

She says the energy transition is a global imperative which cannot be solved by the public sector alone, and requires the participation of all the key stakeholders to build smart regulation, smart investment, technology, R&D, and incubation.

Echoing similar sentiments, Brann says: “The industry is going through a major change, my company is going through a major change, and our customers are going through major change. Companies need to think about things differently, to be able to react and plan and address them to make



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sure we have a more sustainable future.”

“Those are the kinds of things that more diverse teams bring, different ways of thinking to that particular programme and process,” she says. “And I think that diversity of thought leads to better business results overall.”

Next step

As the industry is going through rapid changes, experts believe there is an urgent need to upskill existing workers, as some trades of today may soon become obsolete. Moreover, young female students aspiring to join the industry might need to reconsider the skills and trades they are learning.

Al-Haj-Hasan says that besides acquiring technical skills, individuals should also focus on soft skills because that's what's differentiates people from machines.

She says these big topics like

sustainability, inclusion, and diversity will be better addressed by a workforce that communicates well, is self-aware, adaptable, resilient, and is committed to continuous learning.

Industry experts believe that as technology evolves, companies will need more skilled workers, so providing appropriate guidance to young women studying in universities and colleges may ensure that companies have access to a readily available, future-ready talent pool that can easily be employed.

The global downstream industry is likely to recruit more females in the future as demand for technically skilled people will rise exponentially, and individuals with the requisite skills will be in greater demand.

“I believe things will improve in the future. I am confident that we will have more female executives working in leadership positions and playing critical roles across our industry,” says Al-Shammari. **REFM**