



## PASSAGES PROJECT

### CASE STUDY

# Engendering Utilities Program at the Electricity Distribution Company in Jordan

*In the development sphere, there is a growing realization that addressing social norms is key for successfully shifting behaviors within and across sectors. This case study is one of three done in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), energy and infrastructure, and education sectors. It takes a deep dive in what social norms meant for one energy workforce participation project, and shows the importance of women in leadership roles as a catalyst for progress on gender equality at work.*

## “NO ONE SOLUTION FITS ALL” SOCIAL NORMS IN AN ELECTRICITY UTILITY IN JORDAN

Globally, disproportionately few women have participated in the energy and infrastructure sector across different levels of employment. This gender gap influences opportunity and economic empowerment for women, and limits the ability of these utilities to reach their goals. The USAID Engendering Utilities (EU) program was established in 2013 to address this gender gap, with a long-term aim of creating utilities that are stronger and more diverse. The EU

program design followed formative research on the representation of women and the impact of gender disparities in developing-country electric power distribution companies.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, EU began implementation through projects with seven utility companies in five countries. EU expanded to additional countries and companies, with current funding through 2020. The program

sought to increase women’s participation in the traditionally male-dominated energy and infrastructure sector by improving gender equity and equality at utility companies. EU partnered with private- and public-sector utility companies to assess and improve gender equality through human resource policies and practices, while working to attract more women into the industry. Through these strategies, EU aimed to increase the numbers of female employees at all levels of the targeted companies, including in leadership positions. EU program objectives can be found in Box 2 (next page).

Key elements of the EU program include selecting three utility representatives\* to participate in the “Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program,” a curriculum developed by USAID and Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business. This curriculum empowers the utility to assess gender gaps and implement solutions for increasing gender equality throughout the company through a human resources framework. Based on this curriculum, and working with an expert change management and gender equality coach over three to four years, participating utility staff craft a capstone project, identifying gender gaps and developing an intervention to address these gaps. This approach allows for staff, with best-practice human resources tools, to develop solutions specific to their own context.

One of these participating EU utilities is the Electricity Distribution Company (EDCO) in Jordan, an EU partner since 2016. EDCO was selected for this case study among other potential EU partners based on recommendations from USAID, as well as for logistical reasons. The case study highlights an example of programming focused on strategies to increase the number of women at all levels of the company, including management and operations. As discussed below, EU program results at EDCO include incremental normative change.

EDCO, founded in 1997 and privatized with the rest of Jordan’s power sector in 2002, is headquartered in Amman, and serves 55% of the country by land area. The company serves primarily rural districts including Karak, Tafleeh, Maan, Aqaba, the Jordan Valley, and

\* Utility leadership nominate qualified individuals who meet program requirements; these volunteer representatives usually include senior- or mid-level staff as well as an HR representative.

## Box 1

### WHAT IS PASSAGES?

Passages is an implementation research project that aims to address a broad range of social norms, at scale, to achieve sustained improvements in violence prevention, gender equality, family planning, and reproductive health. The project uses norms-shifting approaches to build the evidence base and contribute to the capacity of the global community to strengthen reproductive health environments, especially for very young adolescents, newly married youth, and first-time parents. Passages capitalizes on these formative life course transitions to test and scale up interventions that promote collective change and foster an enabling environment for family planning, especially healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

#### Activity Overview

With support from USAID’s Office of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GenDev), the Strengthening Social Norms Programming activity studies social norms programming in sectors outside of health. Following a landscaping report, three projects were selected for in-depth case study including review of program data, in-person and phone interviews, and discussions, site visits and observations. Each case study focuses on understanding the role of social norms in the program design and implementation, successes, challenges and lessons learned for future programming.

the entire eastern region of the country, reaching 15% of Jordan’s energy consumers. From 2010 to 2017, EDCO increased female employees from 6% (72 of 1206 total) to 7.7% (111 of 1444 total)<sup>2</sup>. When women do work, it is often seen as ancillary to their husbands’ careers. Indeed, while approximately 60 percent of all university graduates in Jordan are women, they make up only 13 percent of the workforce overall.<sup>3</sup>

## ENGENDERING UTILITIES OBJECTIVES

1

Integrate gender-equality policies throughout the human resource employee life cycle, including talent attraction, hiring, promotion and succession, and separation and retirement

2

Increase gender equality in accessing career development, training, and leadership opportunities

3

Develop and disseminate best practices for gender-equal HR policies and procedures

### Achieving Gender Equality Objectives through Gender Equitable Practices and Policies

EU strives to promote long term gender equality within participating utility companies. To accomplish this, EU at EDCO promoted both gender equity and gender equality strategies.

Gender equity means providing what is needed to reduce the gap between what men and women can achieve within the company. At EDCO, there was a focus on promoting a supportive workplace environment for women; for example, women nursing babies were given time off not available to other employees. These are differential benefits, considered necessary or supportive for women to work at EDCO.

At the same time, EU at EDCO was also concerned with promoting gender equality, or treating female and male employees the same. For example, the EU team worked to ensure that women are treated the same as men in the hiring process.

While the terms 'gender equity' and 'gender equality' mean different things, are sometimes used interchangeably.

In this brief, they are used as defined above. Equality, over the long-term, relies in large part on promoting gender equity in the short-term.

## ROLE OF NORMATIVE CHANGE WITHIN THE PROJECT

The EU program at EDCO was selected to highlight a gender equality initiative where social norm change is not an explicit objective of the project, but where normative change is a potential byproduct of policy change. Several social norms presented barriers to women's participation in the workforce at EDCO (Box 3). The EU project team at EDCO indicated that changing these norms and achieving gender equality within their context **will take longer than the three or four years** allocated for each utility under the EU initiative. Instead, they looked at increased workforce

participation for women in the energy sector and EDCO, while maintaining or improving the company's performance and employee satisfaction<sup>4</sup>, as a benchmark to objectives of gender equality.

Using policy change, a similar approach to the EDCO project to promote gender and social norm change has worked previously in Jordan. For example, establishing a quota of women-elected officials instituted by the Jordanian government shifted representation in the political sphere.

## NORMS LIMITING WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE ENERGY SECTOR AND RELEVANT TO EDCO

- Women do not belong in the work force
- Men should be given preference for jobs because they are financially responsible for their families
- Women should not work in close proximity to men; sex-segregated settings are preferable
- Appropriate jobs for women include being a teacher, health worker, and administrative worker
- It is inappropriate for women to have certain jobs or perform certain job functions such as field work (repairs, home visits)

## NORMATIVE CHANGE WITHIN EDCO: APPROACH AND STRATEGIES

To promote EU's objective of gender equality across levels of employment, EDCO focused on improving human resource policies and practices and promoted a positive work environment for women, in order to increase women's participation throughout the company. For EDCO, this meant bolstering gender-neutral hiring practices; providing leadership training to women to ensure their success on the job; promoting role models of successful women in the energy sector; offering networking and social support among women working in the company; and marketing EDCO as a place where women want to work. These strategies, detailed in the next paragraph, have supported an overall increase in women employees; more women in management positions; and likely played a role in shifting norms related to women's employment, enumerated in Box 2, on page 3.

“*In the beginning, I was saying that women [have] less ability than man. But when I work with women and see their abilities to do things better than men, my thoughts changed.*”

MALE EDCO EMPLOYEE

EDCO implemented several strategies to attract, recruit, and retain women as trainees and as job candidates. These fell into two broad areas: 1) HR policy, and 2) taking steps to achieve a supportive working environment. Among the **HR policy improvements** is the adoption and implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy in 2018 that included gender equal provisions; all employees sign and adhere to the policy. EDCO ensured that they used gender-neutral and gender-sensitive language in job postings. In addition, EDCO actively recruited women applicants, particularly for offices and jobs where there were few women. One recruitment strategy was to work with professors at universities who direct female candidates to EDCO. Another recruitment strategy was to co-host an external networking event, allowing working women and students to meet and hear speakers discuss relevant workplace and policy issues. This event also familiarized women with EDCO, potentially attracting them as candidates in the future.

The second area in which EDCO made changes was the **fostering and advertising of a supportive work environment**. Seeking to promote women's success, EDCO provided **leadership training** to women to improve their management, communication, and leadership skills. Finally, developing an attractive work environment included providing opportunities

for both **social and professional networking** among women. An annual Mother's Day gathering of women working in all EDCO locations provided a venue of public appreciation for women workers, and a way for women to meet one another to talk about both work and personal issues.

EDCO highlighted successful women as **role models**, and promoted the visibility of increasing numbers of women in all areas of the company. The intent of this included having role models for other women to emulate, and to normalize women working in a sector and in roles where women remain a minority. For example, the success of a female as deputy general manager, the second highest position at EDCO, served as a strong role model to employees across EDCO's offices, demonstrating that women could work in positions traditionally reserved for men. At lower levels of seniority, the increasing numbers of female employees included those who led sections and department managers. These visible changes sensitized both men and women to the possibilities of women working in the energy sector and at EDCO. An annual 'Take Your Daughter to Work Day' in Amman promoted engineering and related fields to girls and young women and to their parents and parents' coworkers in the EDCO offices.

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*When I came.... [to her current position], there were only four women, now there are ten. They said women must be at home, cooking, cleaning, taking care of the baby. But then [they] saw what we are doing...[their] mind changed about women.”*

FEMALE EDCO EMPLOYEE

An EDCO accomplishment, which resulted from both HR policy and a more supportive work environment, was recruiting women to work in the call center. Call center employment typically required nighttime shift work, which was perceived in the community as inappropriate for women. Therefore, hiring a woman in the call center necessitated adapting the job to accommodate a daytime-only shift. This strategy and others like it sought to increase the number of women employed, both at different levels and types of jobs.



Caption: The Engendering Utilities implementation team at EDCO. Photo credit: Diane Gardsbane

## EDCO'S FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

The EU team at EDCO achieved policy and workforce participation successes, including implementing an Equal Employment Opportunity policy, bringing more women into leadership training, supporting promotion of qualified women, working with universities to attract and recruit women, and increasing the number of women who work in both their headquarters offices and many of their district offices.

- While no formal evaluation has been conducted to measure normative change, EDCO reports and interviews suggest that there have been **incremental normative shifts about acceptable employment roles for women within the company, including their ability to occupy leadership positions.** In addition, gender norms that were part of hiring practices, including overlooking women applicants in deference to male applicants, have begun to change. These incremental normative shifts were likely supported by the EU program and broader societal change in Jordan, including changes in expectations and numbers of women working.

“...[recruiting] one additional woman in customer service, the call center, is really an achievement. ...success...is always related to the starting point.”

KEY STAKEHOLDER

- Another often cited supportive factor was the indirect influence of government policy requiring a 20% quota within Parliament, which both highlighted existing gender inequality, and helped to **normalize women in roles historically deemed inappropriate.** The quota emerged as significant in a number of interviews, with interviewees citing policy and quotas as a necessary first step to institutionalize and normalize gender equality. According to one male employee in a district office:

“Government must increase the women in the work, and after that mujtama’a (مجتمع) (community or society) will go.”

- An important contributing factor promoting normative change relating to women working at EDCO was **modeling the role of women in jobs and leadership roles previously seen as outside the norm for women.** As women took leadership positions, they were considered capable employees by men, as well as by other women. Women were seen as good workers who may be “more effective” at certain tasks than men and good leaders who bring different approaches to leadership than men.

“It makes a difference for men to have contact with women as a manager. She is more open-minded.”

MALE EDCO EMPLOYEE

- **Increasing the number of women working at EDCO promoted positive perceptions of women as employees, which has driven hiring of more women.** Women were sometimes seen as better equipped for certain roles. One male engineer described that “a female engineer can multitask; she can concentrate better than a male.” While their rationale may reinforce perceptions of the traditional division of roles between men and women, it also supported the increase of women employees at EDCO, with some male managers stating they would specifically hire women for these qualities. In addition, a few men and women have begun to believe that women can take on roles that traditionally remain within the male domain. Although not a frequently heard opinion, this statement, highlighted from a male engineer in a district office, is indicative of shifts in norms that are beginning to happen: “It is a good experience that women work with us here. We love it and we are proud of it. I want to see a [female] technician

*who reads meters and pulls cables...exactly like a man. As an engineer, I would love to see it.”*

- Another factor shifting normative barriers at EDCO was the **support women receive from managers and role models**, and at home from parents and/or partners. The EU team at EDCO promoted **support on the job**, and addressed the safety concerns family members have for women working in the sector. For example, the norm that it was inappropriate for women to travel for work was related to both social expectations and safety concerns. Rather than directly addressing this norm, EU worked around it, sending women on day trips rather than overnight trips, facilitating

their lodging with family, or shifting their responsibilities to exclude work travel.

- Finally, the EU program itself brought **awareness to the cause of gender equality and equity**. One female EDCO employee said: *“We didn’t realize there was a problem until this program—that we don’t have enough women, and we need to be more supportive of them. Personally, I put a goal for myself. I wasn’t head of section for twelve years, and I gained my right to be a head of section during this program, and this was a powerful thing that this program gave us. ... Meeting women from other districts was helpful... it was very powerful.”*

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*[It] is a big challenge trying to do normative change work in sectors where it is less explicitly focused on gender equality, as opposed to in education or health.... You are always trying to balance how to make your case... especially in this sector. Even using the word social norms... often times people will remove that language because it feels so overwhelming...however what they end up designing and implementing in the project often does have an important norms component.”*

USAID STAKEHOLDER

## CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING EDCO

The EU program faced several challenges. Key among these was the broader socio-normative environment, including the fact that EDCO operates in Southern Jordan, a rural and conservative region of the country. Here, norms that place women as the caretakers of the home and children were stronger than in more progressive Amman, holding many women back from entering the workforce. High unemployment throughout the country may have exacerbated gender norms, contributing to the perception that woman with a job, especially a strongly male-coded job such as engineer, was ‘taking it away’ from a man.

When women did enter the workforce the types of jobs they encountered were culturally proscribed,

with a preference for women teaching in schools and working in health centers, both settings that tend to be sex-segregated, and were thus seen as safer and more appropriate workplaces. Even when women broke into male-coded jobs, such as engineering, there were normative restrictions that discouraged women from engaging in some job functions, including travel and physical labor. Some people perceived ‘natural’ limitations of women for specific job tasks, based on personal safety, physical strength, and *mujtama’a*, limited what was considered appropriate or suitable work for women. Within EDCO, these norms acted as barriers for women who sought employment and opportunity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM EDCO TO THE ENERGY SECTOR

Employees had specific recommendations for EDCO to improve women's participation in the workforce, which may have applications to other workplaces trying to foster supportive environments for women.

**Developing supportive HR policies for women (and men) who are parents** was needed, such as an on-site nursery or other support for childcare. This was being actively pursued by EDCO. Other HR policy recommendations—breastfeeding and pumping support, extended maternity leave, and flex time to accommodate school and daycare schedules—addressed common workplace challenges for working mothers.

**Cultivating buy-in and active and ongoing support by upper management** for gender equity initiatives is important for success. Though EU makes a more general business case to energy sector leaders, adapting the case to the specific context would be more engaging and possibly yield stronger support for change.

Some interviewees recommended **promoting participation of women in the workforce beyond the corporate level**, i.e., within

communities or universities. EDCO was involved in an effort to hold a networking event with university students, and repeating and regularizing this could expand the audience it reaches and normalize women working in non-traditional sectors.

From the perspective of “what works” to promote normative change, future iterations of EU in other locations, or similar programs in this and other sectors, might **consider a more explicit focus on social norms**. This would start by identifying specific social norms that may act as barriers to gender equality within the context of a utility company (e.g. norms about women's abilities to make decisions that dictate traditional roles of women versus men in the company), along with other factors (e.g. structural barriers relating to child care), and deciding what norms the initiative seeks to shift. This should be explicit in the program's theory of change and logic model. To implement a social norm change component, objectives, strategies, and indicators of change should be included in the “Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program” curriculum and in capstone projects.

## REFERENCES

- 1 The Engender Utilities Approach. Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development (USAID), March 2020. <https://www.usaid.gov/energy/engendering-utilities/approach>.
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- 4 Reem Hamdan, Mai Rahahleh, Lubna Ghazwi, Strategic Analysis of Gender Equity Opportunities, PPT Presentation to EDCO Senior Management, July 2018.

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