

# Fostering women's professional development in off-grid solar



## About Sun King

Sun King is the global leader in the growing 'pay-as-you-go' (PAYG) off-grid solar energy industry. It aims to replace gas generators and kerosene-powered energy with cleaner, renewable, and more cost-effective energy solutions for the 1.8 billion people who are completely off-grid or unreliably connected to the electric grid, predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

## Our gender partnership

**We worked with Sun King to develop two targeted pilot interventions to (i) improve the gender balance and inclusion of female mid-managers in sales roles and (ii) upskill and mentor high-performing women in more junior sales roles that show promise for future growth into sales management.**

## Impact highlights

- + Demonstrated increase in women's sense of confidence and community with colleagues
- + Groundwork laid for scale up and refinement of both interventions to reach more women more effectively, by applying the lessons learned from the pilot
- + Greater organisational awareness of gender-differentiated experiences in sales roles, leading to wider shifts in policies and practices to support a more inclusive workplace



## Setting the scene

Despite some advancements in recent years, the global energy sector workforce remains **male-dominated**. This imbalance is particularly notable in management positions, with only 20 per cent of such roles held by women in the energy sector. And yet, increasing **evidence** highlights the benefits of a more diverse workforce, including enhanced innovation, improved decision-making, and better financial performance.

Recognising the important role that diversity plays in company success, Sun King conducted a gender diagnostic assessment of its workforce in 2021. While “inclusivity” is one of Sun King’s key values, Sun King’s leadership acknowledged that certain teams and levels of seniority were far from being gender inclusive. Most notably, despite achieving gender balance across the whole organisation, there was a significant disparity in the progression of women to mid-management roles within field sales teams compared to their male counterparts – even when performance levels were comparable. Additionally, data showed a pattern

of low retention of the few women who had progressed to sales manager positions, with some returning to commission-based sales agent roles, while others left the company.

These findings led Sun King to seek the technical assistance of BII and Norfund to address the gender gap within its sales management teams and to diversify its pipeline for future direct sales managers. Together, we commissioned a pilot initiative named *Equal Voices*, which featured two distinctive intervention pillars. The first was dedicated to empowering and fostering a sense of community for women sales managers through peer learning circles; the second was focused on building foundational skills of women junior sales team members to support them in navigating and seizing growth opportunities within the company.



## Sun King and BII – partnership timeline





## Digging deeper – understanding differentiated experiences of men and women in sales roles

The gender diagnostic findings exposed a stark contrast in representation, with women constituting only 13 per cent of Area Business Managers (ABM) – the first line of sales managers – and a mere 10 per cent of Regional Business Managers (RBM) – one level more senior than ABMs, despite making up 45 per cent of Sun King's Sales Agent pool reporting into ABMs.

These disconnects prompted further deep-dive analysis to better understand the dynamics behind the demographic trends. This analysis identified several obstacles impeding women's progression into and retention in mid-management and leadership roles, which in turn informed the design and development of *Equal Voices*.

- High-performing women Sales Agents often found themselves overlooked for promotion opportunities to become full-time ABMs
- Even when high-performing women Sales Agents were invited to apply for ABM roles, they often lacked the confidence to pursue the opportunity or hesitated to go through the interview process
- Those few women who transitioned into ABM positions often faced challenges in navigating an unfamiliar and gender-imbalanced professional space. They encountered obstacles that men in similar roles did not, such as:
  - The need to balance work obligations with their responsibilities and social roles at home
  - Resistance from other team members who were not comfortable taking disciplinary feedback from a woman leader
  - Not being received with similar levels of authority as male peers

**10%**  
of Sun King's Regional Business Managers were women, despite women making up 45% of sales agents.



Reflecting on their experiences, female Area Business Managers (ABMs) at Sun King shared:

*"Sometimes, it's not easy to discuss certain experiences with male colleagues. It would be nice to have a group of female colleagues I could reach out to..."*

*"I wish I had a community of peers I could learn from and lean on for support..."*

Sales Agents and Shop Executives (SSEs) – more junior-level sales associates – also emphasised the need for clear pathways for advancement within the company, questioning,

*"Can I become a sales leader at Sun King? I don't see women RBM or ZBM, so I don't know if it's allowed"*

*"I don't know if I can be a good ABM. Do I have skills for the role?"*



## Equal Voices – How we delivered the project

### Our approach for ABMs

Building on the diagnostic findings, the first pillar, *Equal Voices for ABMs*, piloted a unique and supportive network for women ABMs. It introduced a nine-session programme of peer learning circles, also called 'Chapters', each curated to bring together a group of nine to 11 women ABMs from across Sun King's African presence in Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Nigeria, and Kenya.

These virtual gatherings, facilitated by a more senior sales manager (or 'Chapter Leader'), intentionally maintained a modest size of ABMs to create a safe and supportive space for women to share insights and experiences, and to build collective trust within the unique context of their roles.

Each session, lasting 75-90 minutes, delved into key topics relating to female ABMs' working experiences, including adapting to change, managing conflict, navigating challenging situations, and fostering skills to speak up. This pilot also included 'Fireside chats' with women leaders from different parts of the company, further enriching the dialogue and offering valuable perspectives.

### Our approach for SSEs and Sales Agents

The second pillar, *Equal Voices for SSEs*, comprised a six-month e-learning programme that initially enrolled 15 Sales Agents and Shop Executives in Kenya. This course, featuring 10-minute video modules, focused on building foundational skills to support Sales Agents and SSEs to navigate growth opportunities within Sun King.

The modules were designed for targeted learning, covering diverse but important topics, including the lifecycle of Sun King products, managing risk and compliance, personal finance and long-term financial planning, as well as self-awareness, self-confidence, and interpersonal communications.

In addition to the e-learning modules, each participant was paired with a more experienced colleague who provided guidance throughout the programme – a collaborative aspect designed to enrich the learning experience. Paired colleagues, drawing from their wealth of experience, offered personalised support to address the individual needs and aspirations of each participant. This unique mentorship component fostered a supportive culture, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the programme.





## Equal Voices – What we learned

As with any pilot initiative, *Equal Voices* encountered challenges and yielded valuable lessons used to inform the scale-up plans of these interventions (see next page).

### Equal Voices for ABMs

For its first pillar, Sun King identified key success factors and made the following strategic adjustments:

#### Changing meeting frequency:

Recognising that a monthly schedule was too ambitious, Sun King relaxed this to ensure regular attendance was prioritised, even if it was less than monthly.

#### Promoting stability and maintaining existing levels of trust:

To minimise potential disruptions, peer learning circles did not add any new ABMs to existing circles after the first two sessions. However, new peer learning circles will be established to extend similar support to other women interested in participating in future.

#### Enhancing organisational familiarity:

To ensure active contributions and maximise benefits, Sun King included only ABMs with a minimum tenure of six months in its peer learning chapters.

### Equal Voices for SSEs

The second pillar encountered a more intricate set of challenges, where Sun King had to dig deeper into uncovering barriers to programme uptake:

**Managing expectations:** Some participants mistakenly believed the e-learning programme offered a direct pathway to a promotion, only to realise this was not the case. The pilot highlighted the need for a nuanced communication strategy to manage expectations carefully and to ensure that future participants understand the initiative is there to support broader professional development.

**Refining participant selection:** Despite the pilot's selection of strong-performing individuals, it became evident that personal motivation played a pivotal role in determining participant completion of video modules. Recognising this, Sun King understood the need for a more nuanced approach to participant selection, one that considered performance but also individual aspirations and motivations.

“We realised that not all our agents necessarily want to grow beyond where they are. People may have been interested in engaging in the opportunity because it was presented to them, but that didn't necessarily reflect current readiness or desire to grow.

– Sun King representative

Throughout this journey, we, along with Norfund, facilitated an environment where experimentation, innovation, and responsive changes were actively embraced. This flexibility was integral to the success of *Equal Voices*, demonstrating the power of a collaborative partnership that prioritises the unique needs of a company while supporting the advancement of gender inclusion.

**“We have appreciated the flexibility afforded through the support provided by both BII and Norfund through this process, from the start, in our ability to design an intervention that fit the needs of our company and types of roles we wanted to support, to our selection of an external consultant to work with, to the flexibility to modify the initial timelines to better support the learnings and pace of rollout.”**

– Sun King representative



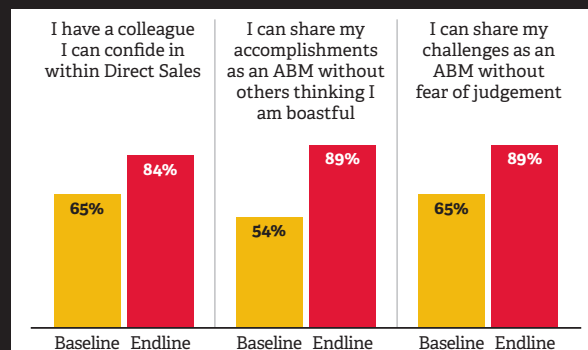
## Our gender impact to-date

The *Equal Voices* pilot benefitted both women directly involved in both pillars, as well as Sun King as an organisation.

### Impact highlights

**Demonstrated increase in women's sense of confidence and community with colleagues**

Endline versus baseline participant survey responses (*see excerpt below*) revealed that women are now more likely to report a heightened sense of community and increased confidence in expressing their opinions and needs. Women have also expressed how the project influenced their personal growth, and have shared stories of newfound resilience, improved interpersonal relationships, and a greater sense of purpose. These positive benefits also extended to the Chapter Leaders who facilitated the ABM peer learning circles, and who have also viewed the circles as a platform for their own personal learning and growth (*see quotes*).



[*Equal Voices*] made me not feel alone, because the stories and challenges shared are relatable.

– ABM participant

I wish the *Equal Voices* programme existed when I started out! I would have been nurtured and armed with the right tools to ensure I am able to navigate my career. I had to learn on the job which can be overwhelming at times and sometimes makes you worry if you are doing well or if you are doing the right thing.

– Chapter Leader

**Groundwork laid for scale up and refinement of both interventions to reach more women more effectively, by applying the lessons learned from the pilot**

Women ABMs who joined Sun King after the initial peer learning circles were established have heard such positive feedback from peers about the experience that they are actively seeking the opportunity to join an *Equal Voices for ABMs* circle themselves. As such, Sun King plans to launch two additional circles and to continue with modified versions of the previous circles informed by the pilot phase. This includes leveraging social media chat groups between Chapter Leaders to share resources for use with their respective peer learning circle.

Meanwhile, *Equal Voices for SSEs* will be relaunched in 2024 with an expanded pool of 30-50 participants. As part of this, the participant selection process will ensure participants are selected based not only on their high performance and tenure but also on their individual motivations. Sun King will continue to incorporate a mentorship feature but will depart from its previous one-on-one pairing model and instead explore grouping regional participants with a mentor, as inspired by the success of *Equal Voices for ABMs* and its use of small collaborative groups.

As part of the scale-up phase, Sun King will capture data to gain insights into participants' professional growth, job satisfaction, and long-term commitment to the company. This approach will ensure Sun King continues to understand the effectiveness of its programmes and is able to make data-driven refinements as necessary.

**Greater organisational awareness of gender-differentiated experiences in sales roles, leading to wider shifts in policies and practices to support a more inclusive workplace**

*Equal Voices* has also positively impacted the gender awareness of Sun King's wider management teams and contributed to broader organisational commitments to diversity and inclusion. For example, Sun King recently revamped its sick leave and parental leave policies to ensure they consider the unique needs and responsibilities of women (including flexibility to take sick leave for menstrual cramps and support for women returning to work after maternity leave), all with the goal of fostering an environment where open discussions about health and caregiving are encouraged without fear repercussions, particularly for women.