

**YOUNG WOMEN IN THE OILFIELD INDUSTRY:
THE NARROW PATH TO FULL INTEGRATION**

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Young women in the oilfield industry: Pursuing full integration

Oil and gas companies are missing out on the potential of women. Now that the industry is thirsty for talent, due to increasing technical challenges and the advancement of exploration frontiers, it cannot disregard this issue any longer. Although the growing number of female students pursuing technical careers suggests that women are a strategic asset to capture for the industry’s labour force, statistics show that hiring and retention of female talent is lagging behind.

Today, the petroleum industry is a male dominated area, where women only represent approximately 20% of all workers. However, this number may vary significantly depending on the country: females comprise only 9% in the UK, 18% in Spain, 26% in Sweden and 20% in Italy, according to the European Labour Force Survey. Most importantly, these numbers fail to reflect the true integration of women in the industry, based on their position within the value chain. Most women in the oil and gas industry work in peripheral positions, which do not comprise revenue-generating units.

The question that arises is why women have less representation in the field. In the first instance, women have to overcome gender-specific challenges. Some women live in cultures where it is not permitted for them to engage in professional activities beyond the classic chores of a household. In other countries, women only have access to peripheral positions in a company, because their country’s law forbids them to work in a producing field.

In addition, women are facing the same issues as their male colleagues that choose to work in the field, including the exposure to health and



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safety hazards specific to an operating facility. Field work also has an important impact on people's lifestyle, as it involves frequent traveling to isolated locations with a working schedule that requires them to be in the field for weeks at a time. Being away from major cities for a long time is a wearing experience for the majority of rig workers and not that many people are willing to accept these challenges. Surprisingly, although man and women face a similar choice, the working conditions are generally perceived as harsher for women than for men, even in more progressive societies. Women on the rigs, however, rarely subscribe to this view.

Such perceptions have led to the preconceived idea that women are less adequate candidates for field jobs. This is exactly where the oil and gas industry misses out on a tremendous opportunity. Women, a growing share of the engineering population, shouldn't be excluded from the hands-on experience which is essential to the gaining of solid technical know-how. There is a consensus amongst the companies that people with field experience are more likely to grow professionally than those who spend most of their career in an office. Having an increasing number of women with field experience in the industry, besides increasing the pool of human resources to tap from, it is an advantage, if not a must when exploring new technological frontiers.

Nowadays, with the potential of women in

the field being underrated, many workplaces are not sufficiently prepared to receive them. A key factor for successful integration of women in a predominantly male environment is acceptance: personnel in the field must be open-minded and accept females as their equals. Companies can support this process by increasing the female presence on their rigs (if necessary only for short periods) and continuously increasing the awareness of their presence.

There are many other options to create a more friendly work environment for women at a rig site. A company can establish separate accommodations as a rule, wherever it is possible. It can also make use of survey tools to inquire how working conditions for women can be improved, thereby incorporating the ideas of the working women themselves. Any idea that can make the quality of life of their employees better and decrease employee turnover at a reasonable cost, can be a win-win situation for the oil and gas companies.

In 2013, women mentioned "more interesting work" and "insufficient opportunity" as their top reasons to leave their jobs in the oilfield sector, emphasising therewith the potential of the women that the oil and gas companies are losing. There is still a lot to be done to reverse this trend, and for the oil and gas industry to fully capture the talent women have to offer to the industry. However, with creativity and motivation it is possible to pursue full integration and bridge this gap. ■