

Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?

The critical need for women to be seen *and* heard



WUN

 the marketing pod

Unconscious bias in the utilities sector:
what is the reality?



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Foreword



In September 2022, Womens Utilities Network (WUN) shone a spotlight on diversity in the utilities industry, creating a report that focused on the gender pay gap and career opportunities for women.¹

What we didn't really set out to discover, but became apparent during our conversations with women, was that many felt disappointed or had become disillusioned due their experiences of working in utilities and were considering leaving their role - or even leaving the industry altogether.

The reasons that women are held back or decide to step away from their careers can be complex and are often linked to wider socio-economic factors. The first step towards solving the problem will be understanding it. In this report, we're taking a closer look at one of the possible root causes of the problem: unconscious bias. It's a fascinating topic and one which every member of our industry should be aware of - but starting conversations around unconscious bias can be tricky because it's something that's difficult to measure and control. As we explain in this report, the best starting place is the assumption that we are all carrying unconscious biases around with us every day.

Assumptions that the stereotypes are always correct, for instance that women are nurturing and emotional while men are ambitious and driven, might not seem harmful at first, but when they influence behaviours in the workplace the results can be incredibly detrimental for women's careers.

We need to make utilities a place where women can stay, develop and thrive.

Why women leave their jobs and careers is a theme that has been explored across industries and across the globe; women leaving the workplace is recognised as a deep-seated problem that's impacting the workforce at large,² contributing to skills shortages and setting equality back.³ In the utilities industry, it's a problem that is being acutely felt because of the transition we're going through. A diverse workforce will be essential to innovation and to filling skills gaps as we pursue our net zero goals.

We need to make utilities a place where women can stay, develop and thrive.

¹ [New WUN report reveals how women really feel about working in the utilities sector](#)

² [Women and the UK economy](#)

³ [Women in the Workplace 2023: Key Findings & Takeaways](#)

One of the survey results that stood out most for me was that 84% of respondents told us that women are generally given more administrative and organisational tasks, over leading and challenging tasks. It's also incredibly difficult to read the heartfelt comments from the women who told us how undervalued they feel, and how often their voices are spoken over or ignored.

WUN will continue to keep working for change, by highlighting the topics our members care about and providing women with opportunities to have their voices heard. It's been a real pleasure to create this report with our partners at The Marketing Pod, a female-founded business that's as committed to creating

fair and diverse workplaces as we are. We were all also delighted to receive so many responses, and I'd like to thank all of the people who responded so openly and honestly to our questions. We'll do our best to make sure this report gets the attention it deserves, so that by the next time we have an opportunity to gather insights from our colleagues in utilities, they will hopefully have more bright and positive stories to share.

Jo Butlin
WUN Founder and CEO



Executive summary



In February 2024, WUN commissioned a survey in partnership with The Marketing Pod, to gain an understanding of how women were being treated in the workplace and whether their experiences demonstrated the existence of unconscious bias. Our survey results portray a utilities industry where unconscious bias is holding back careers and where **women are being seen but not being heard**.

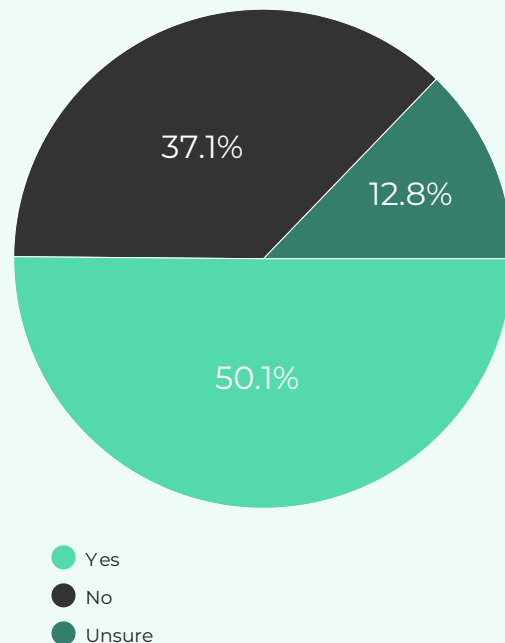
Half of all respondents (50%) told us that they feel as though they are treated differently at work because of their gender.

Unconscious bias is creating a credibility crisis

Women told us that they are regularly interrupted or spoken over, and that their ideas are only accepted when repeated by male colleagues. Regardless of seniority, they are not being treated as equals when it comes to salary, daily workload and career advancement. This is impacting their confidence and preventing them from contributing effectively.

Additionally, those women in utilities who do progress to senior positions often experience the increased scrutiny that comes with being the 'tallest poppy in their field'. They believe that they are likely to be judged more harshly than their male peers.

Do you feel as though you are treated differently at work because of your gender? 375 responses



41% of the women who responded to our survey feel their voice isn't heard at meetings and that they are interrupted when speaking.

49% of the women who responded to our survey do not believe their opinion is as valued at work as much as their counterparts.

Almost half (46%) of the women who responded to our survey told us that they often hesitate to give their opinions or share ideas at work even though they know that what they have to say is valuable.

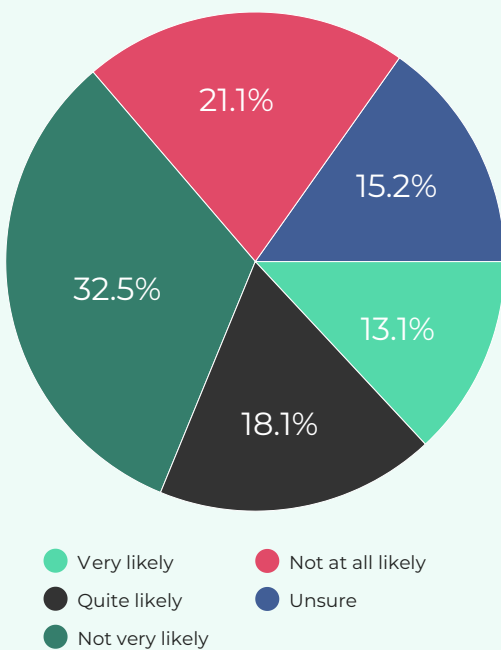
Unconscious bias could impact the future of utilities

Unconscious bias is having a direct effect on women's wellbeing and productivity. It's also affecting the likelihood of them remaining in their careers. Many are considering leaving the industry altogether in the near future.

Almost a third (31%) of those who responded to our survey told us that they would be quite likely or very likely to leave the utilities sector in the next 1-3 years.

How likely are you to consider leaving the utilities sector in the next 1-3 years?

375 responses



Breaking the cycle: Actions we can take

If we fail to address bias in our workplaces, growth and innovation will suffer as a result. Less diverse workplaces will also discourage women from choosing careers in utilities; worsening skills gaps and intensifying the challenges of our transition to net zero.

Thankfully, unconscious bias can be overcome through a more mindful approach to everyday interactions, as well as recruitment and promotion processes.

While detailed training advice is beyond the scope of this report, we have identified five key actions any organisation can take to reduce the impact of unconscious bias and create a workplace where women can thrive.

Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?

5 key actions to reduce the impact of unconscious bias



Change recruitment processes

Standardise your hiring process to remove the chance for bias to creep in. Begin by removing gendered language from job ads and personal details from applications and CVs. Rely instead on defined questions and skills tests.



Encourage mindful decision making

Make an explicit, organisation-wide commitment to question stereotypes, slow down decision making and be more vigilant of thought processes. Talk openly about the existence of, and approaches to, unconscious bias.



Make training mandatory, practical and targeted

Unconscious bias training is most often attended by people already aware of the problem and interested in improving their behaviour. Ensure everybody takes part, then monitor outcomes and identify additional requirements. Reinforce training with team exercises.



Promote advocacy to actively support women

Encourage people to listen to each other's stories and become advocates for those experiencing negative bias. Advocates can speak up to make space for quieter voices in meeting and group situations or intervene privately to correct discrimination.



Hold others accountable

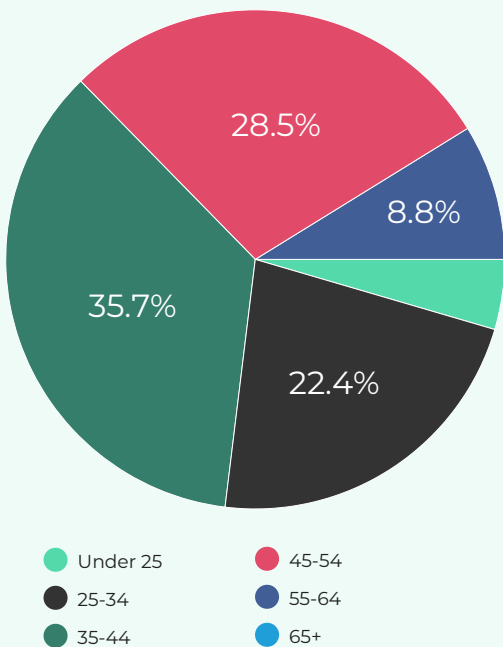
Encourage the calling out of stereotyped views and provide opportunities for increased interaction between affected groups, to build empathy and create a safe, inclusive space for everyone.

Who answered our survey?

We received **375** responses. **96% (358)** of those who responded to the survey described themselves as female. We also had one transgender female respondent, one respondent who described themselves as gender variant/non-conforming and 13 respondents who told us they were male. For the purposes of this report, 'respondents' will refer to all groups, and 'women' will refer to those respondents who identify as female or transgender female.

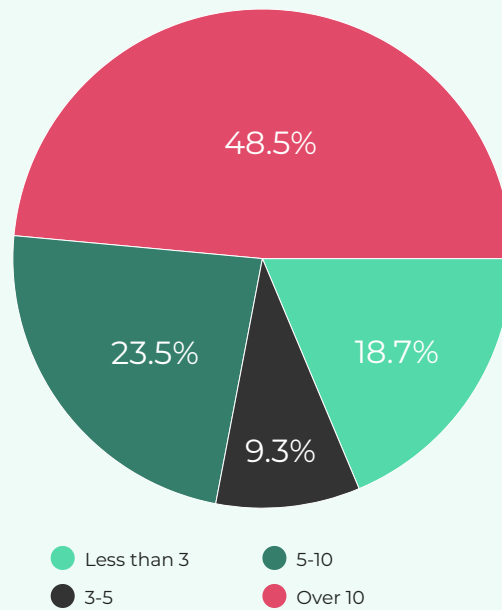
We achieved a relatively good age group and experience split, although younger, less experienced people provided less responses:

Age Group 375 responses



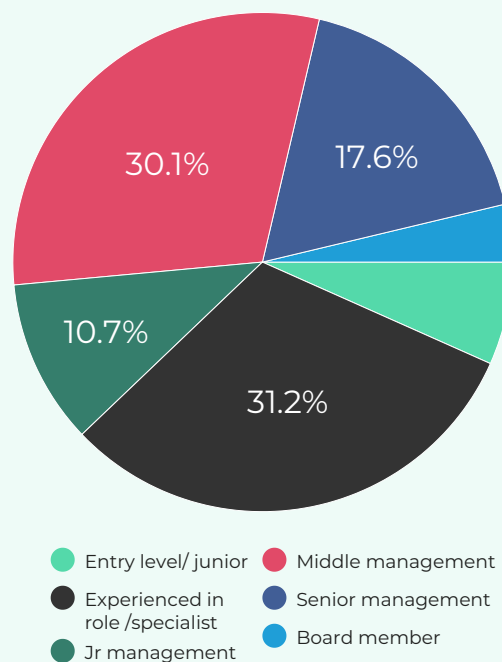
How many years have you spent working in the utilities industry?

375 responses



Which best describes your seniority?

375 responses



Section 1

Life in the utilities industry. What does the workplace look like today?

According to the International Energy Agency, energy is one of the least gender diverse sectors in the global economy today.

'The energy sector has historically been a male-dominated field and its workforce continues to be unrepresentative of the population and workforce at large'.⁴

Their most recent research tells us that women only account for **16%** of the traditional energy sector, despite making up **39%** of the global workforce.⁵ And while the barriers women face in this sector echo those they face elsewhere in the economy, this traditionally male-dominated industry sees women experiencing a larger wage gap than in non-energy industries; **wages are almost 20% lower for female employees than for male employees.**⁴

female representation in senior roles; POWERful Women's 2023 'Annual State of the Nation' report⁷ tells us that women hold 29% of board seats across the energy sector, up from 21% in 2020 and 13% in 2018.

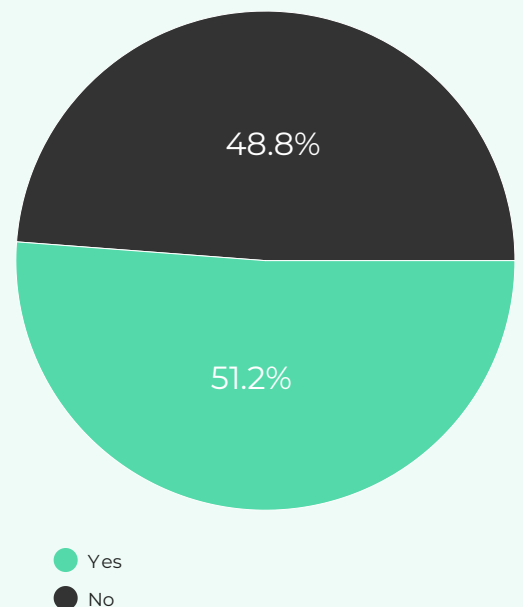
Our own research provided some positive insight too. Just over half of respondents (51%) told us that they have been promoted or moved to a higher paid role in the last 2 years, signalling that the industry provides opportunities for career progress, regardless of gender.



Less than 1/3 of leadership roles in the energy sector are held by women.

It's not all bad news. Progress on workforce diversity has undoubtedly been made in recent years. Here in the UK research from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) tells us that the pay gap across the industry is steadily decreasing, although the figures vary depending on which part of the sector you look at.⁶ There is good news too on

Have you either been promoted in your current workplace, or moved jobs to a higher paid role in a different organisation in the last 1-2 years?
375 responses



4 [Understanding Gender Gaps in Wages, Employment and Career Trajectories in the Energy Sector - Analysis - IEA](#)
5 [Energy and Gender - Topics - IEA](#)
6 [The gender pay gap in the energy and utilities sector - EU Skills](#)
7 [POWERful Women | Company statistics 2023](#)

Unfortunately, the fact remains that 74% of top UK energy companies have no women in executive board seats, while less than one third of all leadership roles in the energy sector are held by women.⁷

As things stand, the utilities industry neither represents the consumers it serves nor the talent available in the workforce: a fact which should be of critical concern during this challenging and innovation-focused era. Could unconscious bias be at least partly to blame?



Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?

Everyday life for women in the sector

For those women already working in the sector, it's clear that a lack of diversity is making everyday life and career progression more difficult. In its 'Women we are Losing' report, POWERful Women identified an unsupportive work environment and feeling undervalued as two of the reasons that the sector loses a disproportionate amount of female talent; sentiments we heard echoed in our own research.

As we will uncover in the later sections of this report, many of the women who responded to our 2024 opinion survey on unconscious bias have experienced their voices being ignored or interrupted, or are treated as though they have less knowledge and experience than they do, and it's affecting their productivity and wellbeing.



41%

of the women who responded to our survey feel their voice isn't heard at meetings and that they are interrupted when speaking.



49%

of the women who responded to our survey do not believe their opinion is as valued at work as much as their counterparts.

Tall poppy syndrome explained

Unsupportive working environments that lack diversity are making it harder for women to progress in their careers. Those that do make it to the most senior roles often find themselves facing intense scrutiny. As the tallest poppy in their field, others are ready to cut them down. Of the women who responded to our survey, **Almost a third (31%)** felt they would be judged harshly if they failed or underperformed for any reason.

**39%**

of the women who responded to our survey believe that people at work often assume they know less than they do or over-explain things.

**33%**

of the women who responded to our survey are often asked to complete tasks that they are overqualified for.

Meanwhile, the IEA report suggests that even when a woman is able to achieve career progression, inequality remains a problem. The gender wage gap is significantly higher for high-skilled workers, which may be reflective of a lack of access to the most senior roles but also suggests that women do not have the bargaining power that their male counterparts possess. Research also suggests that those that do make it to the top are likely to suffer from what a report in The Times recently referred to as 'tall poppy syndrome'; feeling a need to visibly outperform, or suffer the harshest criticism.⁸

Section **2**

What is unconscious bias and why does it matter?

Unconscious bias is best explained as a mental shortcut that can lead to (often incorrect) snap judgements.

The mental shortcuts may be based on gender, race or other individual characteristics and can lead to judgements about a person's competence or character - or preconceptions about their interests and behaviours.

It's important to recognise that each one of us carries some type of unconscious bias around each day. Women are not immune from exhibiting unconscious bias. In fact, one of the women who responded to our survey told us:

'If something goes wrong, my work is scrutinised very harshly, mostly by other women. Men tend to be more relaxed and understanding...'

Our biases will be based on our own background, the cultural environment we grew up in and our life experiences. Unconscious bias developed as an instinct in early humans, back when we were reliant on our amygdala - the most ancient part of our brains. It once helped us to quickly process the information needed to distinguish friend from foe, or to decide on flight or fight. Today, the same instinct causes us to make almost instantaneous decisions about everything around us - but in modern society, these unreasoned judgements are frequently wrong. **Stepping back and taking a moment to apply rational thinking can quickly expose the flaws in our unconscious response.**

For example, research shared by the Royal Society tells us that due to unconscious bias, people are more likely to listen to a male voice than a female one.⁹ We also believe deeper voices to be more authoritative. This may mean we are less likely to pay attention when a woman is speaking, regardless of her specialist knowledge, experience or seniority.



This type of unconscious bias is certainly something that the women we spoke to during our recent research can relate to. Their responses suggest that where different styles of communicating mean that their voices are less loud or considered less authoritative than those around them, important opinions are likely to go unheard. Here's what they told us

'There is a certain way of presenting opinions in the workplace which is considered more valuable or authoritative, which doesn't reflect my natural style. I have to work harder to present an idea in a way that gets heard, rather than the group being open to alternative styles.'

'I am quiet and methodical, the loud people have their opinions listened to.'

'Organisations should be developing better listening skills at a managerial and leadership level. Just because some types of people are naturally quieter than others, it doesn't mean that they don't have important things to say.'

'I am naturally quiet but often get interrupted at meetings which makes me less inclined to speak up.'

Why does unconscious bias matter?

Unconscious bias in the workplace has the potential to:

- prevent talented people from realising their true potential
- reduce productivity and morale
- stifle creativity
- create a damaging echo chamber effect; particularly when different styles of communication are not respected as having equal status.

Research tells us that diverse leadership correlates strongly with financial performance, holistic growth and happier, more productive workforces.¹⁰ Conversely, organisations that fail to listen to, or elevate, diverse voices put their future growth in jeopardy and may only be able to draw on information and opinions that reflect and reinforce the status quo.

Add to this the fact that unconscious bias in the workplace is likely to go hand-in-hand with confirmation bias; a tendency to seek out and favour information that supports preexisting beliefs, and it is clear that **if we fail to address bias in our workplaces, it is almost certain that growth and innovation will suffer as a result.**

9 [Understanding Unconscious Bias | Royal Society](#)

10 [Why diversity matters even more | McKinsey](#)

Section **3**

Does the utilities sector have an unconscious bias problem?

Unconscious bias exists in every corner of society and in every workplace.

McKinsey's 2023 Women in the Workplace report provides insights into the specific biases and barriers faced by Asian, Black, Latina, and LGBTQ+ women and women with disabilities. It tells us that while women are as committed to their careers as men, the 'broken rung' is preventing many of them from making the first steps up into managerial positions and is slowing down their career progress overall.¹¹

The problem is arguably intensified in the utilities industry where, as in other traditionally male-dominated industries such as law and finance, the unconscious bias problem faced by women is aggravated by the existence of what the Guardian recently termed an 'old boys' club'.¹² The female experiences relayed in its 'Sexism in the City' article, and those which brought about the House of Commons' Treasury Committee inquiry it references, demonstrate that some industries lag woefully behind in the race for gender equality.

While many workplaces are taking strides forward in equality thanks to mandatory gender-pay-gap reporting and the post-pandemic trend towards flexible working, women in some of the more traditional industries are still finding it difficult or impossible to overcome long-ingrained tendencies towards misogyny, struggling to have their voices heard - and (as the article Guardian depicts) even being classed as 'over the top' when they object to being ignored.

¹¹ [Women in the Workplace 2023 report | McKinsey](#)

¹² [Sexism in the City | The Guardian](#)

¹³ [In the race to net zero, green jobs struggle with the gender gap - Raconteur](#)

¹⁴ [Catapult | Skills Diversity in Heating](#)

Is the problem set to get worse?

The utilities industry's diversity problem is increasingly in the spotlight, thanks to an understanding that the net zero transition will require it. PwC has estimated that the energy sector alone will require 250,000 more employees as we transition to a low-carbon economy.¹³ Unfortunately, it is also estimated that only a quarter of those jobs will be filled by women by 2030. Not only does this mean that the industry will miss out on the fresh perspective that women can bring, and the innovation that comes with a more diverse workforce, it also means that women are missing out on STEM and technical roles which typically pay more and provide good prospects for progression.

Alongside this, recent research from Energy Systems Catapult (ESC) highlights how a failure to make women feel welcomed is worsening the skill shortage that exists in the heating sector: a sector crucial to achieving net zero. Only 2% of the heating industry workforce are female. It's a shockingly low figure, but that doesn't mean change isn't possible if we act on the findings.

As the ESC report explains, the percentage of underrepresented groups in the utilities workforce could be increased by taking a number of measures such as 'tackling discrimination' and creating 'a healthy and inclusive environment, in which [underrepresented groups] feel a sense of belonging'.¹⁴



Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?

What does our data tell us?

The responses to our survey portrayed a utilities industry where progress on diversity and inclusion was being made in some areas, and where some women were rising up through the ranks.

One told us:

'I feel I am respected in my position now compared to over five plus years ago when I moved into the sector.'

While others told us the following:

'I feel quite lucky in my organisation that I've never felt like I have to continually prove myself - I totally appreciate that this is a common reality for many women in the industry but is thankfully not an experience I've had.'

'I have fought hard to get to the table and my opinion is now valued, but this has taken a long time...'

Sadly, this is not a universal experience. Many women in utilities are still experiencing inequality; **over half of all respondents (50%) feel as though they are treated differently at work because of their gender.**

Our respondents also told us that women are not being treated equally when it comes to salary, daily workload and career advancement.

- **Less than one third (31%)** of respondents feel as though women are being treated equally when it comes to salary.
- **Almost a third (29%)** told us that they do not feel as though women are treated equally when it comes to the allocation of daily workload.

As we have mentioned, unconscious bias is something we are all capable of displaying, and it can exist for a number of reasons. We asked our respondents whether they felt that they were treated differently for any reasons other than gender. Here's what they told us:

22%

said they felt they were treated differently because of their **race**.

20%

said they were treated differently because of their **age**.

18%

said they were treated differently because of their **sexuality**.

18%

said they were treated differently because of a **health condition**.

7%

said they were treated differently because of a **disability**.

Other reasons included; working part time and being a parent, socio-economic factors and the presence of an accent. It's clear from these responses that there is much to do before the utilities industry can claim that it is a fair and inclusive place to work.



Section **4**

How is unconscious bias holding back careers?

It is generally accepted that diversity is vital to a healthy and productive workplace. Unfortunately, research has revealed that it is lacking in the utilities industry, and our survey results demonstrate that unconscious bias could be a factor; creating a challenging and uncomfortable working environment that prevents people from contributing effectively and from reaching their full potential.

- **Almost half (46%)** of the women who responded to our survey told us that they often hesitate to give their opinions or share ideas at work even though they know they are valuable.
- **More than a quarter of respondents (26%)** believe that they have been passed over for promotion because of their gender, while 31% felt that they had experienced the same because of assumptions based on their personal circumstances.

Women as 'caregivers' not career seekers

Back in 1998, Project Implicit was founded at Harvard University by three respected scientists. It set out to prove that implicit associations, or unconscious bias helps to define our beliefs, influence our attitudes and govern our behaviour. Since its inception, it has provided some startling statistics about the way that participants think, particularly when it comes to male and female roles.

This underlying association of women with the 'caregiver' stereotype and men with the 'hunter-gatherer' stereotype may be partly to blame for today's workplace experiences. It may explain why women have to perform at a higher level to be taken seriously, and work harder to prove themselves as committed and capable in their careers.



75% of participants in the Implicit Association Test have an automatic association of male with career and female with family.¹⁵ Only 9% have an automatic association of female with career and male with family.

In the next section, we'll take a closer look at how women's real-life experiences of unconscious bias are affecting their mental health and wellbeing, and causing them to second guess themselves. Our survey also told us that unconscious bias is holding back careers on a purely practical level, by influencing whether or not a person is considered for promotion and the types of tasks they are assigned during their working day.

42% of respondents told us that they do not feel as though women are being treated equally when it comes to career advancement in the utilities industry.

A third (33%) of the women who responded to our survey are often asked to complete tasks which they are overqualified for.

Significantly, our respondents also told us that women were much more likely to be assigned the types of tasks that might be associated with the 'caregiver' role, regardless of their seniority.

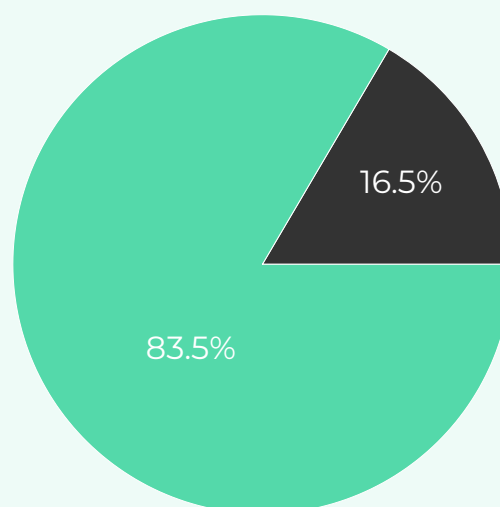
The fact that women are more likely to be given administrative jobs was also reflected in the experiences which our female respondents shared with us:

'I was on a Teams call with a number of male employees and was one of the most senior people on the call. As the session started, one male attendee asked if I was taking the notes.'

'Women are often seen as the ones to pick up admin and stuff other people don't want to do.'

84% of respondents told us that women are generally given more administrative and organisational tasks, over leading and challenging tasks. The response to this question was similar regardless of the respondent's level of seniority.

Would you say women are generally given more administrative and organisational tasks, or more leading and challenging tasks? 375 responses



- Administrative and organisational
- Leading and more challenging



Section **5**

Real life experiences of unconscious bias at work

The ideal workplace is one where every person progresses according to ability and merit; regardless of gender, race or other individual characteristics that have nothing to do with how well they can perform in their role.

Unfortunately, work is actually a place where our unconscious biases are more likely to affect our decisions and behaviours. As The Royal Society's briefing on unconscious bias tells us, 'It is particularly when under time pressure or other stress that our hidden biases automatically come into play and take over the control of our actions or judgments.'¹⁶

How does that manifest in the workplace?

Earlier in this report, we explained that unconscious bias can be explained as a mental shortcut that can lead to (often incorrect) snap judgements. The human brain is adept at fast-processing on a subconscious level which it may not always be appropriate to rely on. We are also pre-programmed to find familiarity pleasant and to feel more confident and in control when we experience familiarity. This can often manifest as a positive bias towards our 'in-group' and a negative bias towards our 'out-group.'

Left unchecked, our unconscious bias may influence the people we choose to have on our teams and the people we choose to promote. It may also influence whose judgement we value and whose voices we listen to.

It's important to acknowledge that our unconscious 'in-group' may not only be people that are similar or familiar to us, it may also include people that we perceive as more popular or powerful. This explains why women in the workplace sometimes show a positive unconscious bias towards men, and may treat other women unfairly.

The responses to our survey provide a deeper insight into the way that unconscious bias manifests in today's utilities workplace, where diversity is lacking and most leadership roles are occupied by men.

The women who responded told us that their expertise is not being acknowledged, that their opinions are being overlooked and that they have to work much harder to be respected than their male colleagues. They told us that they often have things over-explained to them unnecessarily.

Interestingly, they also told us that they feel as though their performance will be considered a reflection of women as a whole, and that the performance of other women affects how they are viewed; an experience and a pressure not shared by their male counterparts.

'Expectations of me as a female are greater than my male counterparts, more technical issues are explained to me slowly and I have to demonstrate I understand the issue, while others just nod.'

'As a leader, I have to work harder to build credibility.'

'I constantly need to over-perform to be considered in the same ballpark as a man.'

'There is still a tendency to group women together as a hive - so if I underperform it is because I am a woman rather than I have done badly as a person.'

'I'm very visible in my role so not only do I let myself down, but feel that other women in my position are judged on my performance in a way that men in my organisation don't need to worry about.'

'One failure is a strike out, whereas men can have many opportunities to fail and it's called development.'

'There are times when I have had my job explained to me and been asked to check with my line manager.'

'I have the most experience in my department but the managers treat me like a new starter.'

'I had a new manager come in and explain to me, in a meeting, what an RACI was. I've been in programme management and transformation for 20 years.'

'I've had clients slightly incredulously say, "So you're the person who can help us do...?" - I believe that I need to show deeper knowledge than my male counterparts in these early meetings.'

'I have been at my company for over 5 years. I often get spoken to about issues I have been involved in with the assumption I do not know anything.'



Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?

The impact on confidence and wellbeing

Unconscious bias isn't just holding women back on a practical level, or by affecting the way others judge them. It is also limiting their potential in a more insidious way; by damaging their confidence and wellbeing. When forced to continually over-perform

and second-guess themselves within an unsupportive environment, the women who responded to our survey reported feeling less confident in their own abilities.

Almost half of the women who responded to our survey (46%) told us that they often hesitate to give their opinions or share ideas at work even though they know they are valuable.



Here are some of the other things they told us:

'It's hard to assess, I think others around me (males) are taken more seriously and their opinion respected more than mine, but I put this down to them being better than me.'

'There is a bully in our team who constantly put me down early on and it has remained with me. I lack confidence.'

'My 'mind talk' would be the main judge rather than others.'

On imposter syndrome: 'I assume that [if I fail] people will believe they have finally seen the real me, the poor performer that has just been getting away with it so far.'

'I punish myself more than this [harsh judgement] being a reality.'

'My personal standards have more influence on my fear of failure than my employer and colleagues.'



Section **6**

The credibility crisis. Are women being seen but not heard?

One of the strongest messages which came through in our research was that **women in utilities feel as though their voices are not being heard.**

Some of the women that responded to our survey expressed that they have a communication style which is not traditionally recognised as authoritative; perhaps due to having a quieter tone or less assertive style of delivery. For others, the problem is that they are being continually interrupted in meetings or are even simply being ignored - only to have their ideas repeated by male colleagues and taken on board.

The issue is clear: unconscious bias is damaging women's credibility in the utilities sector. The reasons why this is so are a little more complex.

In male-dominated industries like utilities, law and finance, one problem seems to be that more 'old-fashioned' corporate attitudes still exist. Employees are expected to conform to traditional masculine norms and be both assertive and unemotional to be considered credible. Meanwhile, gentleness, empathy or the ability to show vulnerability - accepted in many other industries as valuable leadership qualities - might cause colleagues to decide you are less credible.

However, the problem is not only experienced by quieter, less assertive women. The recent 'Sexism in the city'¹⁷ article from the Guardian we referred to earlier tells a story of a woman who did repeatedly assert herself, presenting evidence to her board that the London-based investment firm she worked for risked falling foul of European regulations. When a male colleague raised the same issue and immediately gained support from the boss who had ignored her, she called the meeting to a standstill, only to be told that she was being 'over the top'. The responses to our survey build a similar picture; depicting an industry where female faces are few and female opinions are disregarded, even if they come from confident women in senior roles. Those women who are assertive risk being seen as 'pushy' or 'moaning too much'.

The women we heard from in the utilities industry told us that they are regularly or continuously interrupted, spoken over and not taken seriously, and that their ideas are only accepted when repeated by male colleagues. One even told us that they get their male colleagues to reiterate what they have said in order to get heard. The frequency with which we heard similar testimonials from our survey respondents points to a credibility crisis that must no longer be ignored.

'Constantly on Teams, face to face meetings and even informal conversations I am spoken over.'

'I am continually interrupted and often will hear words I have spoken that were ignored then restated by a male member of the team which are then acted upon.'

'I will make a suggestion with no response and a male colleague will make the same suggestion and it will be agreed. Sometimes I wonder if I speak a different language they don't understand and am totally at a loss how I get the same response.'

'I frequently have to get male colleagues to reiterate what I have already said for it to hold credibility.'

'As someone that regularly presents to boards and panels, my voice is often interrupted or not taken seriously until a man repeats my point. I think my age is also a hindrance at times.'

'My male colleagues with similar or less experience can make similar statements [to me] and they seem to get more traction. I also find I hold back sometimes for fear of seeming to[sic] pushy or to be moaning too much, even when my feedback or points are valid.'

'I say something, it's ignored. A man says the same thing, it's a great idea and he gets credit, this has happened too many times to even list.'



Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?



'People are very dismissive of what I say... I have recently been in a situation where an idea I came up with for a plant redesign was credited to another male colleague from a different department!'

I often find that my advice is not taken by senior male colleagues despite being an expert in my field. I need a man to back up my opinion to make it valid.'

'I am only just starting to feel I have a voice after 27 years of service.'

'My point of view is overlooked.'

'I have given so much feedback on how I believe the business should work to be more efficient. I often get the nod of agreement, and then nothing changes. I often feel that if I was a man giving these examples of business failures, the directors would listen.'

'I was leading on business development. However, an engineering colleague with no business development experience said if that's the case he will have to keep a close eye on me.'

'My opinion will generally be sidelined-and reappear as a male colleague's good idea a few days later.'

'There really are too many examples to mention. It is a daily bombardment. I am in my fifties with a wealth of experience at a senior level and if I had daughters I would discourage them from entering the sector.'

A deeper industry problem?

It's important to note that it isn't just women who feel that the utilities sector is a less than supportive environment. When we asked male respondents about their experiences, we learned that they too were feeling as though their opinions were undervalued and their voices unheard. This suggests that the utilities sector has a deeper culture problem that needs to be addressed.

'I feel this is more to do with the senior member of staff and if they are career hungry rather than capable. My past line manager was a woman, so it was nothing to do with gender, it was more to do with her passing on workload and then covering her back with blame.'

'My voice is often not heard by all colleagues regardless of gender.'

Section **7**

Education is evolution: Recognising your unconscious bias

The first step to reducing, and eventually eliminating, the detrimental impact of unconscious bias in the workplace is raising awareness - but even doing this can be problematic.

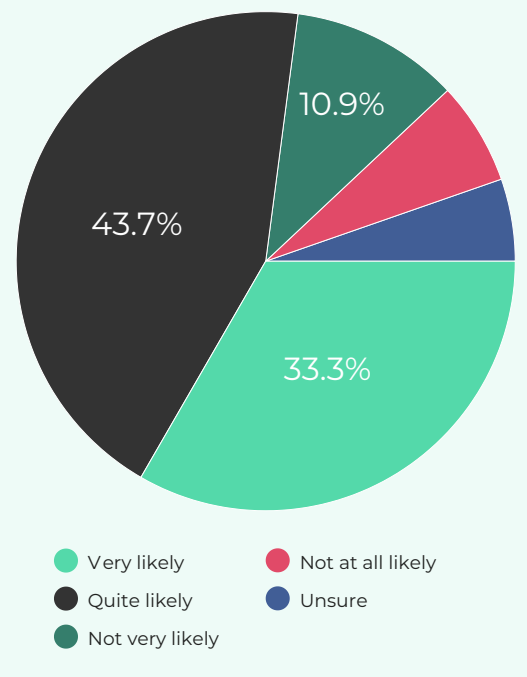
Just as everybody is prone to unconscious bias, each and every one of us has a tendency to believe that we are more fair and less prejudiced than the average person.¹⁸

For education on unconscious bias to be effective, it needs to begin with the assumption that we are all guilty of it. Only then can we start to challenge the thinking patterns that are impacting women's experiences in the workplace.

During our research, we asked respondents to evaluate their own unconscious bias towards female colleagues with one simple question: **'How likely are you to assume that a colleague with children is the primary caregiver?'** The question was repeated with female and male colleagues as the subject.

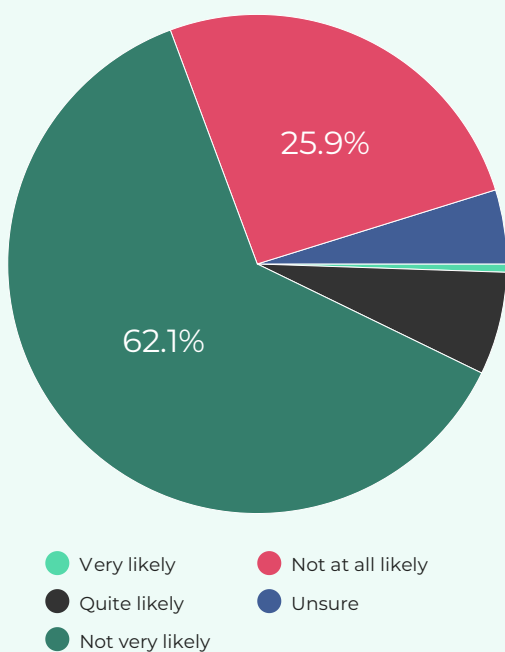
78% of respondents told us that they were very likely or quite likely to assume that a female colleague with children is the primary caregiver. However, when it came to male colleagues the opposite is true; **88%** told us they were 'not very likely' or 'not at all likely' to assume a male colleague with children is the primary caregiver.

If a female colleague has a family with children, how likely are you to assume that they are the primary caregiver?
375 responses



If a male colleague has a family with children, how likely are you to assume that they are the primary caregiver?

375 responses



Unconscious bias regarding topics like child care might not at first seem detrimental to a woman’s credibility at work, but this kind of thinking is often indicative of other ingrained beliefs; for example that a woman is less committed to her career or less likely to progress to a senior position. By challenging these familiar yet not always accurate stereotypes, we can start to overcome our own unconscious biases, recognise that people are not always what we expect them to be, and take the time to discover facts about the people we meet or work with each day, rather than letting snap judgements dictate our interactions.

‘I attended a business breakfast where a team member was speaking [and] was listening to others on my table during a breakout session. The chat was about renewables and sustainability. I sat quietly listening to their opinions, then offered my own. As I could clearly articulate complex ideas and input well to the conversation, there was shock around the table. The men I was sitting with questioned who I was and I explained I was a director and managed the man delivering the speech. They were visibly shocked.’



Section **7**

Preparing to change. Five key actions you can take now

The biggest problem with unconscious bias, as discussed throughout this report, is that our biases arise from deeply ingrained instincts and age-old brain-processes.

In many cases, people are unaware of - or unwilling - to recognise their own biases. We may also find some biases difficult to acknowledge because they are at odds with our conscious thinking. For example, someone may believe themselves to be a feminist and be willing to profess openly that women deserve equality in the workplace but may also exhibit subtle behaviours at work which suggest that they think their female colleagues are less experienced or less capable.

Training in unconscious bias is often ineffective for two main reasons: Firstly because it may inadvertently send the message that unconscious bias is involuntary and therefore unavoidable, and secondly because it all too often begins and ends with explaining what unconscious bias is, without providing practical advice for overcoming it.

When examining why many unconscious bias training programmes fail, Harvard Business Review (HBR) found that, 'only 10% of training programmes gave attendees strategies for reducing bias', comparing this to 'a weight-loss programme that told participants to step on the scale and left it at that'. HBR goes on to recommend that training provides people with concrete tools for changing their behaviour, empathising with others' experiences and feeling motivated to create a more inclusive environment.

Training can often include visualisation methods, as well as strategies for enabling more mindful interactions. While providing the right training tools for reducing unconscious bias is beyond the scope of this report, there are five key actions that any organisation can take to reduce the impact of unconscious bias and create a fairer workplace where women can thrive. Unconscious bias regarding topics like child care might not at first seem detrimental to a woman's credibility at work, but this kind of thinking is often indicative of other ingrained beliefs; for example that a woman is less committed to her career or less likely to progress to a senior position. By challenging these familiar yet not always accurate stereotypes, we can start to overcome our own unconscious biases, recognise that people are not always what we expect them to be, and take the time to discover facts about the people we meet or work with each day, rather than letting snap judgements dictate our interactions.

5 key actions to reduce the impact of unconscious bias



Change recruitment processes

Standardise your hiring process to remove the chance for bias to creep in. Begin by removing gendered language from job ads and personal details from applications and CVs. Rely instead on defined questions and skills tests.



Encourage mindful decision making

Make an explicit, organisation-wide commitment to question stereotypes, slow down decision making and be more vigilant of thought processes. Talk openly about the existence of, and approaches to, unconscious bias.



Make training mandatory, practical and targeted

Unconscious bias training is most often attended by people already aware of the problem and interested in improving their behaviour. Ensure everybody takes part, then monitor outcomes and identify additional requirements. Reinforce training with team exercises.



Promote advocacy to actively support women

Encourage people to listen to each other's stories and become advocates for those experiencing negative bias. Advocates can speak up to make space for quieter voices in meeting and group situations or intervene privately to correct discrimination.



Hold others accountable

Encourage the calling out of stereotyped views and provide opportunities for increased interaction between affected groups, to build empathy and create a safe, inclusive space for everyone.



Change will benefit us all

It's likely that the utilities industry will have to work harder than some others to diversify its workforce and overcome unconscious bias. Gender stereotypes are still preventing women from entering and excelling in careers associated with science and technology both here in the UK and across the globe,²¹ and utilities is still very much considered to be a male environment.

But if we can work together and bring about change, it will benefit our industry as a whole, both in the short and long term. We're facing a challenging future, where the overriding need to decarbonise must be balanced with the need for energy security and affordability. A diverse workplace will be essential to ensuring we have the right talent to secure the future we all want.

Back in 2021, McKinsey²² reported that reasons for quitting during the 'Great Resignation' were less often 'transactional' eg. linked to compensation,

perks and poor health, and more often 'relational' eg. linked to feeling valued or a sense of belonging. Considered alongside the results of our 2024 survey, this observation still rings true, but unconscious bias can damage that sense of belonging, and prevent workplaces from being places where people feel safe and valued.

Thankfully, unconscious bias can be overcome through a more mindful approach to everyday interactions, as well as structured and standardised recruitment and promotion processes. Despite being almost impossible to eliminate altogether, becoming aware of our biases gives us the power to correct them before we act on them.

Much of the problem will also be solved by increasing diversity in the workplace, enabling us to shift our perception of what is 'normal' and relegate outdated, career-damaging gender stereotypes to the history books.

About Womens Utilities Network

Womens Utilities Network was started to give women the skills and confidence they need to build lasting, fulfilling careers in the utilities sector. Founded by a group of women who have themselves built successful careers in both energy and water, WUN seeks to help other women to build the right networks, get the right training and take control of their own work lives, whichever stage of their career they are at.

We know that the inequalities in the sector won't change unless we do something about it, and we're passionate about building a community of women who can connect, support, develop and encourage one another.

We have over 6,400 members and followers and over 50 partners. Visit our website if you would like to join as a member, partner with us or become a mentor or mentee.

WUN

About The Marketing Pod

The Marketing Pod is a B2B agency that believes in using the power of B2B marketing to help ambitious, ethical and sustainable businesses grow and lead by example. It is proud to count energy, water and cleantech organisations among its key clients.

Founded by two women from corporate energy backgrounds ten years ago, the agency is now recognised as a Great

Place to Work and ranked 14th out of 100 in Best Places to Work for Wellbeing in 2023 as well as 21st in the UK for Best Places to Work for Women.

Find out more at marketingpod.com





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