RFI is a global technology solutions company—designing, manufacturing and supplying solutions around the globe to over 90 countries. In the solar industry, RFI continues to be one of Australia’s largest wholesalers, designers and integrators. RFI has been a trusted brand in solar power, wireless coverage and IoT technology since 1979.

But not only is RFI an Australian success story in terms of distribution, they are leading the charge when it comes to creating an equal playing field with gender.

***WHO’S WHO AT RFI:***

Hana Said: Customer Experience Team and Sales
Jennifer Hilder: Customer Experience Team
Leonie deJager: Customer Experience Manager
Lois Yutong Li: Solar Engineer and Product Manager
Alkyra Hutchison-Menzer: Solar Product Manager

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**Smashing the glass the ceiling**

In an exclusive interview with *Ecogeneration*, the female employees of RFI discuss their experiences working in the renewables sector and how the tide of change is happening...albeit slowly.

**As women working in renewables are you keen to see a greater gender balance or is the sector evolving naturally?**

**Hana Said**: I think businesses generally are try to keep equilibrium in gender equality, but I can see it’s also naturally evolving.

**Jennifer Hilder**: I do think that it’s evolving naturally, however I think it could happen a little bit quicker. I think that although there are women’s roles and women in different roles especially within RFI, I feel there should be more of it. It’s still a very male-dominated industry. I think we’re probably above [other organisations] and I’d base that on the percentage of phone calls we receive from women vs men.

**Leonie deJager**: Absolutely I’d like to see more women around. We’re getting there but the pace is kind of slow and I think we could get there a bit faster if we encouraged women more. Often in our male dominated industry, there’s the implication that men know more than women, so I think if we got rid of that stigmatism that would naturally encourage women to join in and go for it.

**Lois Yutong Li**: I would say at the moment that it’s a sector evolving naturally. Within RFI, we’ve got more female co-workers involved. When I go outside or when I attend an exhibition or when I attend a training session most of the attendees are male and people are surprised to hear there’s a female and she’s an engineer.

**Alkyra Hutchison-Menzer**: Always keen to see more women getting involved in technical roles. It’s a very heavily male-dominated industry and I think that’s very true of most technical industries. Having said that there’s more and more of us coming into the market, both in management roles and support roles and in trade roles. I think that’s absolutely fantastic but it is still heavily male-dominated.

**Do you feel there is adequate professional development for women in this sector?**

**Hana Said**: That’s a great question. I’m glad you’ve asked. I think it’s okay for now. What are they doing for men that they aren’t doing for women?

**Jennifer Hilder**: I’m going to say yes, I do believe there is, because if any of us wanted to do something, then we wouldn’t be stopped. I went and did a TAFE course and I was the only woman in the TAFE course at the time, but I went and did it.

**Leonie DeJager**: Yes. Really, there’s nothing we can’t do that men can, it’s just that I think sometimes we might feel like...
we’re the odd one out if we’re the only woman in the room. So I think maybe there’s enough but we just need that encouragement. Lois Yutong Li: Well I think the opportunity is out there. It’s equal and if you want to approach it and if you want to achieve the professional development you can always do that. When I was at uni, there were a lot of male students, more male students than women in the engineering faculties or renewable PV faculties. But still, women did graduate. I think the opportunity was provided equally; its just women should be encouraged and get more confidence to achieve our goals.

Alkyra Hutchison-Menzer: I don’t particularly think its gender restricted, I think it’s available; I don’t however think there’s a huge push and a huge focus on professional development in a general sense.

Have you ever faced criticism or negativity because of your gender?

Hana Said: I think it’s an issue that females struggle with every day anyway. I don’t think it’s necessarily specific to the role we’re in. But I do feel like the more women that do it the easier it becomes for us.

Jennifer Hilder: I wouldn’t say that it’s negative, but I do feel there’s less expected of you being a woman and I’ll say that when you give a customer an answer Alkyra has provided, they call up and say can I speak to “him”. They just assume a man is the knowledgeable one in this field. So when I say she’s a woman, 99% of the time they say, oh thank god you told me that!

Leonie deJager: Absolutely, all the time. It happens quite often in the industry we’re in. There seems to be this stigmatism that women don’t know quite as much as men do and men do a better job than women do, so I find that we get that quite often and I think that if we had a male in our team, like when we used to they used to prefer to go to them, which we don’t have now!

Alkyra Hutchison-Menzer: That’s a really interesting one. In terms of negativity no. Surprise? Absolutely. “Oh wow this female on the phone knows something in a technical context”. The surprise I get sometimes has been quite pronounced and it’s sometimes flattering and sometimes insulting. The astonishment that a female can know what she’s talking about in a technical role. So certainly in some aspects, when someone calls through for help and thinks they’re talking to a receptionist but realises when they start talking to you that you know what you’re talking about, there’s a pause on the other end of the phone and they mentally change gears and know that I can help. To be honest, sometimes it’s annoying. But in terms of negative response, no, not so much. More surprise than anything else.

Lois Yutong Li: I wouldn’t say criticism or negativity, but people get surprised you’re an engineer and when they know I’m a girl they’re surprised most of the time. [Eco: Were there any female professors at Uni? Were there any women in the renewable energy area?] Yeah there were several.

Actually a few, not a majority but there’s several professors and PhD’s. But I will say still more males than females.

Hana Said: Well in saying that, I guess Leonie pointed out women aren’t taken as seriously as men. They think women are less educated or less smart or whatever. Did you ever feel that way, in any of these things? Were you ever considered a lesser person I guess? Did you ever feel men dominated I guess? Did it ever make you feel small?

Lois Yutong Li: I wouldn’t say boys are smarter than girls, but boys over the years have probably moved towards mathematics, physics, chemistry, and those things, which the engineering industry requires. That’s probably the reason males dominate this industry, where historically we’ve seen women who’ve been good at the arts, literature, things like that. And it’s another kind of smart, so I think if it’s EQ or IQ wise they’re equal. They’re the same, it just depends on the careers, the industries we get involved in. [Eco: Do you think if there was no bias in society it would be different? That maybe people would go more into PV and things like that?]

Leonie deJager: That’s what I was saying; I still think there’s a stigmatism around the industry that it’s a male dominated industry.

Jennifer Hilder: I don’t think it’s that bad but it is still a male dominated industry and if you were to go out on a site then the people installing this stuff will probably be all male. ☹️

SECONDARY INJECTION AND POWER QUALITY TESTING

Our testing and commissioning team offers comprehensive testing services to the commercial and industrial solar installers. With the changes to AS/NZS 4777:2015 the grid connected solar systems above 30kW must install grid protection relays and requires secondary injection testing to prove that the correct operation of the protection relay as per the parameters set by the DNSP.

Some DNSP’s also require power quality readings with the solar system connected and disconnected as part of their requirements to approve solar systems

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