



Shaping a Powerful Future for Women

Commissioner Sherina Maye Edwards

When discussing my job as a state regulatory Commissioner with those unfamiliar with the business, I typically explain that regulators balance the interests of utilities, who seek to recover costs for making multi-million dollar investments, with those of consumers, who want safe and reliable service at affordable rates. We are like referees keeping the playing field between utilities and consumers fair by enforcing the “rules” of the game. While this may sound straightforward enough, many of us know the energy industry is anything but simple.

I was appointed to the Illinois Commerce Commission in February of 2013. I am an attorney by trade and, at that time, I had no exposure to or concept of the vastness of the energy industry and what my role as a regulator would entail. I knew that I paid my electric, gas and water bills, but beyond that I had given hardly any thought to the role of utilities in my daily life. I found the learning curve to be quite steep, and was intimidated by the scope and degree of knowledge that so many in the industry seemed to possess. At times it felt like I might never get to a point where discussing—let alone ruling on—these complicated and technical issues came easily. However, I was pleasantly surprised by how quickly I became interested in this subject matter that was so foreign to me. This made it easier to dive head-first into my role as a regulator and, though there will always be new and difficult issues to tackle, I haven’t looked back since.

As a woman of color and the youngest Illinois commissioner ever appointed, it is not always easy to be a leader in an industry with an aging, male dominated and largely non-diverse workforce. Once I was appointed to the ICC, it didn’t take me long to discover that my commitment to diversity and inclusion would continuously merit special time and attention. So, in September of 2014, I founded the Women’s Energy Summit as an annual forum for select women across the nation to discuss pertinent issues in the energy industry, highlight accomplishments, uplift rising stars, and



Commissioner Sherina Maye Edwards was appointed to the Illinois Commerce Commission by Governor Pat Quinn in 2013.

Prior to her appointment, Commissioner Edwards practiced law at Locke Lord LLP, an internationally ranked firm. She has taken an interest in electric reliability, water, natural gas and critical infrastructure issues. Through NARUC, Commissioner Edwards serves as Vice-Chair of the Subcommittee on Education and Research and as a member of the Committees on Gas and Utility Marketplace Access, with previous service on the Water Committee.

She earned a B.A. in Psychology from Spelman College and a J.D. from Howard University School of Law.

break down barriers, whether perceived or real, to the promotion and increase of women in the industry.

The success of the first Women's Energy Summit showed me that there was a real need to create a forum where the work of empowering women in the energy industry could take place on a continual basis as opposed to just at once a year. Shortly after the 2014 Summit, my team set out to find such a forum and learned of the Women's Energy Network (WEN). WEN is an organization of professional women who work across the energy value chain. Its mission is to develop programs to provide networking opportunities and foster career and leadership development of women who work in the energy industries. We learned that while WEN had several chapters throughout the U.S., they had no Midwestern presence. After several months of working with WEN's national team, I co-founded the Chicago chapter of WEN in August of 2015. WEN Chicago has since planned and hosted several events, including networking gatherings, STEM Forums, and professional development workshops.

While it can be challenging and time-consuming to stay on top of my workload as a state regulator, plan the annual Women's Energy Summit, and fulfill my duties as President-Elect of WEN Chicago, the rewards in terms of creating unique spaces for women in this industry to grow, learn and share are immeasurable.

When it comes to unique spaces, many other organizations devoted to the professional development of women in this industry do not have the international component that WIE has. I think that this international element is what sets WIE apart from other industry organizations for women. International experiences are incredibly valuable for professionals at any career level. In May of 2015, through my involvement with the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC), and its partnership with the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC), I traveled to Dubai, UAE, to present at a technical workshop on best practices and approaches in reliability and quality of power. This trip required a great deal of preparation, but ended up being one of the most fulfilling things I've done both personally and professionally as a Commissioner. While NARUC provides a regular space for U.S. regulators to share best practices and discuss industry trends, the international perspectives I gained while in Dubai were unique and unparalleled. I hope that through organizations such as WIE, other women in this industry will be exposed to and take advantage of these types of invaluable international relationships and opportunities.

While there are increasing opportunities and spaces for women, I think the energy industry is still falling short, especially with respect to women in leadership positions. As such, it is important for all organizational cultures to recognize the various demands placed on women both within and outside of the workplace and resist the urge to hold the outside demands against us. While it is difficult for all professionals to balance work and family, women should not disproportionately have to make sacrifices in order to be successful and fulfilled wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, co-workers, supervisors, executive leaders. Career-life balance should not be treated and/or perceived as a zero sum game. It is important for company leaders to remember this in order to retain the best talent across the industry.

In terms of attracting talent, I believe that drawing women into the energy sector begins with making STEM subjects attractive for girls early in their education. Many of the best jobs in our industry require a background in science, technology, engineering and/or mathematics, yet these are not always the subjects that girls and women are drawn to or told that they can

excel at when they envision careers for themselves. However, research does show that women are typically drawn to careers where they feel that their work contributes to local, national, and global communities in positive and meaningful ways. It appears to me that there is a pervasive perception problem in that women do not identify STEM careers as those that have these desired impacts. If we can work to publicize the profound effects STEM and energy careers have on humanity, this would be big step towards not only attracting women to the industry, but also retaining them.

For young women currently finding their way in the energy sector, my advice is to never be complacent and to always think about where you want to be professionally a year, five years, and ten years down the road. All of us should not only constantly set short- and long-term goals, but also strategize as to how we can make our current job, assignments, or projects get us closer to achieving those goals. The key to a successful career is building and maintaining a strong professional network. I often say that your network is your “net worth,” and I truly believe this. I have the privilege of working with and among countless knowledgeable and kind people. Nurturing, sustaining and growing these relationships over the years has proven to be a mutually beneficial strategy for me; I gain so much from my network of friends and colleagues and I hope that they, in turn, feel that I add value to their professional endeavors when called upon to do so.

Additionally, it is incredibly important for women leaders to mentor younger women in any industry. I have several mentees and also established an internship program at the Commission where I introduce female law students to the energy industry in the hope that they love it enough to return to it. I’m happy to say that my first intern is now my legal and policy advisor, and my 4th intern is currently working within the ICC’s Office of General Counsel. My commitment to mentorship comes from my own good fortune in having several admirable female mentors throughout my career.

As leaders, men also need to advocate for and mentor women with potential. Because there are so many more males in positions of leadership in our industry, men need to do their part to move the needle forward. If capable women aren’t being given the attention or grooming they deserve to succeed, excel, and advance, organizations and ultimately our entire industry will lose out on massive amounts of great talent. In other words, it doesn’t just make sense to uplift women, it makes dollars.

From grid modernization efforts to countless technological innovations changing the way we consume, generate and store energy, it’s certainly an exciting time to be a professional in the utility space. While there is always room for more visibility, women have undoubtedly made their mark on the energy industry worldwide. I am beyond confident that women will continue to achieve great things, attain leadership positions, and add incalculable value to the electrifying changes coming down the industry pipeline.