

# Khayakazi

**Chair** of CIGRE Women in Engineering International

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Interview with **Khayakazi Dioka**



# Dioka



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**Inspiring the Next Generation  
of Women Leaders**





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**Khayakazi Dioka is a visionary, a mentor and a leader. She is married, mother of two daughters and has 17 years of experience at Eskom Holdings SOC, where she now works as Corporate Specialist for Transformers and Reactors. Since January 2019, she is also the international chairperson for CIGRE Women in Engineering (WiE). In an interview with our Editor in Chief, Khaya talked about her involvement in CIGRE, her various roles and the importance of encouraging women and young engineers to actively participate in building the future of the transformer industry.**



**Alan Ross:** I have the pleasure of speaking with Khayakazi Dioka, who is responsible for more transformers in South Africa than anyone I know in North America. Alongside her role of Corporate Specialist for Transformers and Reactors at Eskom Holdings, Khayakazi is also actively involved with CIGRE and IEEE. How long have you been involved with CIGRE? Tell me a little bit about your background with them.

**Khayakazi Dioka:** Thank you very much, Alan. I am actively involved in CIGRE, which is an engineering body. I learned about CIGRE when I was still an engineer in training, which was over 15 years ago. At the time, I was a protection settings engineer and I really wanted to be a specialist. I think I had good mentors and that is one of the reasons why I managed to achieve that. I attended some of CIGRE events and I even went to Europe for the Study Committee B5 Colloquium - this is the Study Committee for Power Systems and Protection. Over the years I got to know more about CIGRE, and when I joined the power transformers department here at Eskom, I then fell more on the transformers Study Committee.

While I was the transformer engineer, I was invited to be a guest speaker at the Women in Engineering (WiE) Forum at the CIGRE Paris session in 2016. One of my colleagues, who was the representative at the Study Committee for transformers, invited me to come with to the meeting. I think one of the rules was that, if you are not a member, you are not supposed to talk (or at least that's what I heard). And I thought about discussing a lot of things that I do, because everything that they were talking about was my work. But I just kept it together at the time.

Later on at the same seating, I presented at the WiE Forum. Interestingly, when I had come back to South Africa, the chairperson of the Study Committee A2 for power transformers sent me an email with my CV, which he had received

from the then chairperson of the International CIGRE WiE. He said that my scope is quite interesting and involves everything that they do within the A2 Committee. He invited me to come and talk about women in engineering at the next colloquium.

The colloquium was held in Poland, and the Study Committee representatives from different countries were going to be there. That is how my second invitation to a CIGRE session came about. I was going to talk about how A2 can encourage more women engineers to participate. And obviously there were only one or two other women in the room, and there were almost 100 people in there.

I did my talk, but because this was a colloquium where papers were being presented, I could also raise my hand. I was asking a lot of relevant questions based on my experience, to try and find answers. Since I look after transformers, I wanted to know how a solution that is being presented is going to assist me to better manage the transformers here at home. From that, the chairperson saw me, I think, as one of the

people he was looking for to be part of this study committee.

I think the rest is history. I became the committee member and also a liaison person to assist the Study Committee in increasing the women membership. I am currently in the Strategic Committee and there are two of us ladies who are conveners of the advisory groups, out of their six or seven gentlemen. That is progress already, because this is probably the first time they have that within the A2 Study Committee for power transformers.

**AR** One of the things that we would love for you to be part of is our Women in Power Systems. You mentioned your daughters; involving more girls in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) is a global phenomenon. You also mentioned women in the boardroom, that you have to grow in your career to be there and be able to make boardroom decisions, since leaders are needed at the board level. And that is one of the things that Women in Power Systems wants to be a bridge to.



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***The second time I was invited to a CIGRE session, I was going to talk about how the A2 Study Committee for transformers can encourage more women engineers to participate. And yes, there were maybe about two women in the room with almost 100 people.***

Women are conveners and they tend to come together better than men do. Men typically have their isolated agenda of going out and conquering the world. Part of what we try to do at CIGRE and IEEE is raise awareness of the importance of doing something together. That is why we have committees.

As you talk about your role, which is now going to be a growing role with more women in engineering and in power systems, what is it that you can say to people like me? Not to the women, but to us who are the last generation and are passing on a legacy. I am going to be retiring soon, and I want to be able to pass on a positive legacy. What can you say to me and others like me as we end our careers? What do we need to do differently to support what you have been doing?

**KD** I think I can summarize it by saying that you need to see us. What does that mean? In a boardroom, as a woman, you are there to contribute. You don't want somebody to interpret what you are trying to say based on prejudice. And we need sponsors. We need a lot of support. In the boardroom, there is no equality at present. Even if I were to come up with an idea, people will believe that what I am bringing on board is an emotional idea. When a John brings the same idea, but rephrases it, people say Well, actually, that is a good idea, but Khaya did say exactly the same thing. It is a daily struggle for a woman engineer - even at my level - that people would just go behind you or above you to get an opinion out of someone with a deeper voice. And that is the sad reality. You could be the specialist in that field and probably more knowledgeable in the room, but who says it still matters. Support is very important. It is critical, especially from the people who are already in those positions. And the majority of people occupying such leadership positions at this point in time are still men. We need men to support women at those levels.



**AR** You just hit me right between the eyes. We need to see women in those positions not as women who are engineers, but as engineers who are women. Because if we see you as engineers, we see you as experts who have great knowledge and expertise, who happen to be women. We see you as that next generation that can bring vitality and ideas.

I don't think women politicize as much as men do. We tend to have a political hierarchy because we are always competing for space. Women tend to bring out the best in a lot of people. I think that is why a person like Susan McNelly was good at running the IEEE Power & Energy Society (PES) transformer committee, with 200 members. The situation in CIGRE must be challenging, given the scope of the organization. Tell us a bit about your role in connecting CIGRE and South Africa.

***At CIGRE conferences, you will notice that the participants are mainly men – and it is not just men, it is elderly men. There is a missing generation. We are trying to close that gap, and for that aim we have two forums: the Women in Engineering, and the Young Engineers Forum, which is the Next Generation Network.***

**KD** As you know, CIGRE works through national committees. I am part of the South African National Committee. And one of the biggest mandates of CIGRE is to increase the active participation of both women engineers and young engineers in South Africa. I am responsible for those two. I have now given over the young engineers to the younger engineers to lead, but I am still driving it from the executive board point of view.

I am sure that you have noticed, when looking at pictures of CIGRE conferences, that the participants are mainly men - and it is not just men, it is elderly men. There is a missing generation. That is our biggest concern. When the older generation leaves, who is going to drive this mandate of putting all of the engineering work together? Who is going to put together guidelines and make the standards as active as at that time when they want to implement them? We are trying to close that gap, and hence the two forums: the Women in Engineering, and the Young Engineers Forum, which is the Next Generation Network.



***In our forums, we try to empower, encourage and mentor each other. When you are chairing a session, you need to be confident enough to occupy that space, and you need to understand that you are there because you deserve it.***

We are trying to make sure that we get all the young engineers active. That is what I have been leading in the Southern African space, as well as getting more women engineers actively involved, actively participating in CIGRE activities. If we are organizing a conference, we need those engineers to stand up and participate, write papers, chair sessions. You would be surprised by how many people are in the transformer space (as an example), but every time you look for a chairperson, the same male names come up, even though there is maybe a brilliant lady in research that is doing the work on transformers and understands that subject.

I think what we are trying to do is to say, but Khaya is there, but Jane is there, but Mary is

there, and they can do this. There are a lot of stereotypes and barriers that we have to overcome. What we try to do in our forums is empower each other, encourage each other, and mentor each other. You need to be confident enough to occupy that space. When you are chairing a session, for example, you need to be confident enough, because it is your space, and you need to understand that you are there because you deserve it. We want you to flourish in that space. That is what we strive for in our forums.

I have young engineers who are trying to write papers on transformers. After I work with them



on a paper, I don't even have to be involved with the next one, I can just do that final review. That is mentorship, that is passing the baton to the next engineer and trying to build them. And that is something that we have missed for years. The girl child especially has been overlooked for a very long time.

**AR** Speaking in the name of elderly men, we have a responsibility to do what Khaya just said. It cannot be left up to that next generation, because Khaya is the next generation of leaders. If she is challenging us, what we have to do is make an environment where women feel invited and welcome and

they feel that their knowledge is respected. We need to find the people who want to speak out, and some of them are afraid. They want to make sure that they are accepted.

The next generation of women is of critical importance for our society as a whole. If we get more young women involved in STEM, society will be better for it.

Khaya, you are brilliant. Thank you so much for sharing your passion with us.

**KD** Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

