

“Be the change you want to see in the world”

Testimonial Interview with REMENA batch 12 graduate M.Sc. B.A. Djalila Ben-Bouchta, gender expert and RE professional with cross-sectoral expertise

Intro: Today I have the pleasure to talk to Djalila Ben-Bouchta, REMENA batch 12 graduate. Djalila, you joint REMENA with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Oriental Studies and graduated from the REMENA program with a Master of Science (M.Sc.) degree in 2019 with excellent marks.

Djalila, you are located in Cairo now. Tell us more about the projects in the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa you are involved in. What exactly is your current field of work?

Djalila: After my graduation from the REMENA program, I worked as Business Development Manager with a special focus on social impact & gender related issues for a start-up called Solera Power Vending Machine based in Zambia. We installed relatively small-scaled (25 kWp) solar powered containers in rural Zambia to enable access to electricity for productive use of activities. This means that we mainly focused on connecting existing businesses to enhance their productivity and income. These solar powered containers also brought new services to the villages, including health care, education, telecommunication, and agriculture related opportunities to just mention a few. Since mid-2020, I am working as Business Development Assistant Manager at Infinity Energy on utility-scale projects across Africa and the Middle East region. For me it is fascinating to see what it takes to realize large scale projects based on renewable energies. Working in the business development department means to connect all the dots between finance, legal, technical, procurement, government relations, environmental and social aspects that finally lead to the materialization of such projects.

REMENA: How much is your work related to Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency issues?

Djalila: The two companies I have worked with so far entirely focus on renewable energies, i.e. solar PV, wind power and waste to energy projects. In my first role at Solera, we focused on enabling rural business owners to switch from fossil fuels (mainly diesel generators) to solar PV. Now in my role at Infinity, we support governments and the private sector to use energy that is generated from a renewable energy source. Energy efficiency always plays a key role in all these projects to render all kinds of business models feasible.

REMENA: Your Master thesis focused on the topic “Gender and Energy for Sustainable Development“. Do you think that the use of energy differs by gender? Could women possibly make a difference when it comes to energy consumption?

Djalila: Research focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa shows that energy consumption entails a gender component because women and men engage differently in energy-related activities, mainly due to persisting inequalities in domestic work, and the disproportionately higher burden on women in that regard: Women and men participate in different business types, they use different energy resources and appliances, work from different locations, and their access to business enablers such as assets, finance, markets, infrastructure and skills varies. While men are typically involved in larger-sized enterprises that require higher electricity demands, female-led businesses predominantly rely on process heat and mechanical power operated on conventional fuels such as firewood, charcoal, and LPG. Female-led enterprises tend to be located closer to their homes and they are engaged more in the informal service sector, including businesses such as small retail, tailoring, hairdressing, food preparation, phone charging, and running hotels/restaurants. While women prioritize appliances that enhance their daily chores, men tend to prefer technologies related to entertainment such as television sets, radios, and sound systems, or that improve food and beverage consumption like refrigerators.

Therefore, in my opinion it is crucial that both governments and the private sector adapt a gender lens for energy-related projects.

REMENA: What made you opt for a Master's in Renewable Energy and why did you choose the REMENA program?

Djalila: After my undergraduate studies in Oriental Studies (or Middle Eastern Studies as it is called sometimes) I wanted to diversify my skills set and focus more on science and engineering. I had the impression that in order to contribute to sustainable development, especially in the North Africa and Middle East (MENA) region, I need to learn skills that can potentially change this region in the long run. Given my deep interest in the MENA region, the REMENA program as part of the German Arab Master's Programs (GAMP) offering a double master's degree awarded by both a German university and a university located in the MENA region was a huge incentive for me. I also enjoyed the interdisciplinary approach of REMENA, meaning the nexus between engineering focused subjects on the one hand and subjects like economics and politics of renewables, intercultural skills, and project management on the other hand.

REMENA: What makes REMENA special?

Djalila: REMENA represents a diverse graduate program that allows students of all kinds of academic and cultural backgrounds to develop and enhance their skills. The program is designed for a limited number of students which - from my perspective - increases the learning curve of each student. Additionally, we were able to learn from professors and lecturers of various backgrounds enabling us to see different work fields. Moreover, I personally benefitted from the excursions of political and technical nature a lot because they provided insights into what it looks like to work in the respective field.

REMENA: Would you give any advice to REMENA newcomers?

Djalila: The REMENA program was one of the most challenging, yet very inspiring and life changing times of my life. Not having an engineering background mainly contributed to this feeling. But I can say with certainty, that whoever is passionate about sustainable development, renewable energies, and energy efficiency not only from a technical but also in regard to political, economic, environmental and social issues and is willing to learn and improve themselves will not only graduate successfully from REMENA but will also be able to work in reputable organizations/entities in the energy sector and related fields across the globe.

REMENA: What makes the REMENA program special for you/what special benefit did you gain from it?

Djalila: REMENA laid the foundation for my career in the renewable energy industry and opened doors for me that I would have never been able to access without the skills I learned through REMENA. Until now, I am so grateful for all the support I received from the REMENA professors and lecturers.

REMENA: You have opened quite a few doors already: You have recently been awarded the ENI Award for young talents from Africa for your doctoral proposal based on your Master thesis. You have suggested a multi-disciplinary approach to the provision of energy services to enable the productive use of energy for women entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa.

The ENI Award, considered as the "Nobel Prize for Energy" has become an internationally recognized award for research in the energy and environment sectors and the importance of scientific research for innovation. The young talents award includes a scholarship for doctoral research at the Università Politecnica di Torino. The REMENA team cordially congratulates you on this award and is convinced that the motto holds true for you "Be the change you want to see in the world". <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2021/10/eni-award-2020-prizes-scientific-research-awarded-today-eni-president-italy.html>