

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

AUGUST 2020

LEADERS IN ACTION

Antonia Lorenzo Lopez
CEO & Co-Founder, Bioazul



FINDING SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS IN WATER MANAGEMENT

Antonia Lorenzo Lopez helped to found Bioazul in 2003, to discover sustainable solutions for water management in Spain. Since then the company has designed and implemented sustainable wastewater treatment plants and solid waste management products.

Antonia, assumed the role of CEO of Bioazul in 2008, is one of two remaining founders still at the company, from the six who began it, and owns a 67 per cent share.

Antonia grew up in the southeast of Spain, on the coast of Murcia. At the age of 18, she decided to travel to Ireland to work as an au pair. At the time, a young woman from her region travelling alone to another country was not taken lightly by her family.

“My father was quite advanced at the time, but this was too much for him,” Antonia said. Her parents relented when a friend agreed to go with her, however, her grandmother, did not talk to her mother for nearly four months. “I probably would not have had that problem if I were a man,” Antonia said.

Gaining insights in innovation, research and development

By overcoming the challenge of learning a new language and living far away from home, Antonia began to think of how she could maintain her international focus in her studies and work. Returning home, she went to the University of Murcia to study chemistry and agricultural technology and spent her final year studying abroad in Belgium through an ERASMUS student exchange programme.

Her first job experience was working in a lab, but her supervisor's patronizing attitude to women spurred her to get a research and development position at a German research centre.

This gave her a lot of experience in looking for ways of minimizing agricultural food waste, and in finding ecological solutions for dealing with residual water from wastewater plants.

Antonia began to think of ways to start a company that could be beneficial for her home country, where there has always been a demand for efficient water technology. Spain has an economy heavily based in agriculture and, like other Mediterranean countries, has an extremely dry climate. She, and five of her colleagues from Spain and Germany, soon came up with the idea of Bioazul.

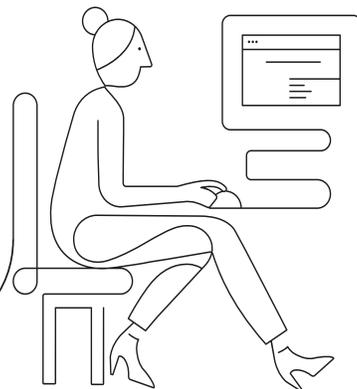
Innovating solutions towards eco-friendly waste management and water treatment

At the time when Bioazul was incorporated, there were many big companies in Spain working in the water sector, but not many were working on small-scale sustainable innovation projects related to water. Antonia and her co-founders needed to find clients, and funding.

With a three-year grant from the Spanish Government the company began to work on a project to reduce sewage sludge produced in wastewater treatment plants. The objectives of this programme were both environmental and economic for various companies in food and agriculture.

The idea of starting Bioazul, Antonia explained, "was to work more and more in research and innovation projects and then get experience, gain knowledge and get access rights to project results to be able to build a portfolio of sustainable technologies and services that we could commercialize."

Today, the company also works as a consulting firm for private sector companies to produce tailor-made environmentally sustainable solutions in wastewater management and water treatment and reuse. Bioazul offers engineering and design as well as the construction and implementation of the solution. It continues to secure local private clients and supports research and development through European initiatives such as Horizon 2020.



Overcoming gender-bias and supporting women's empowerment

Antonia, throughout her time working in Germany, had never felt judged as a woman for her opinion or working style. Once she entered the water sector as a leader in innovation, she found she was the only woman working in this field.

"[The] water sector is really a man's world... [especially] if you go into the [field] with construction companies managing wastewater treatment plants."

Outside mainland Europe she continues to be challenged as a woman working in a male-dominated sector. She has discovered that some men refuse to talk with her about some issues because she is a woman. When this happens, Antonia delegates her work of negotiating a contract to a male employee.

"This is the only situation in which I feel that people look at me in a different way because I am a woman," Antonia said.

Antonia is one of the few women attending international meetings on the water sector, but she hopes through hiring more women and supporting their career growth and development, she can help shift the gender balance.

"I believe that we are better if we are a balanced group [of women and men]. The way women think and the way we approach the problems/challenges is [...] different from the way men think and approach them. The group is more effective [when balanced] and this is probably one of the biggest lessons [...] I have learned," Antonia said.

Bioazul has prioritized gender equality and women's empowerment from the beginning, and signing the Women's Empowerment Principles in April 2020 lined up perfectly with the work they were already doing. Bioazul has only 12 employees but Antonia works hard to ensure that women and men are treated equally from the hiring process, to pay, and to internal promotion opportunities.

Antonia's colleagues shared that she leads with fairness and compassion, fostering an inclusive workplace culture. Employees working in Bioazul respect one another and their opinions; gender-based discrimination is not tolerated.

With COVID-19 placing in-person projects on hold, Bioazul employees have been able to successfully work from home, and are now slowly reopening their office with social distancing measures in place.

Since signing the WEPs, Antonia and her team have been working diligently to ensure their current policies align with the WEPs, and are implementing a tracking system to work in tandem with the WEPs Gender Gap Analysis Tool.



Women's Empowerment Principles



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Employee well-being and safety



Education and training for women



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Measurement and reporting

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