



## Meet Prof. Maria Ines Valla

This month, I have the pleasure of speaking with Prof. Maria Ines Valla (Figure 1), who, through a 40-year academic career, has been an active member of the IEEE Industrial Electronics Society (IES). She works in power electronics at the Research Institute in Electronics, Control, and Signal Processing, School of Engineering, National University of La Plata, Argentina. She has been a member of the Buenos Aires Academy of Engineering since 2007 and is currently the secretary.

**Lucia Lo Bello:** Maria, thank you very much for accepting my invitation. Please share a bit of your experience with us. Tell me, how did you chose a career in engineering? Who inspired you, a professor or someone else?

*Maria Ines Valla:* My decision to study electrical engineering has its roots in two different aspects. On one side, my father was mechanical engineer, and my mother was a professor of mathematics, so I had good examples in exact sciences, but I preferred something that could combine theoretical and practical aspects. Besides, I wanted to have a choice other than being a teacher or professor. Engineering looked like a good alternative. On the other side, a completely different aspect appeared while I participated in an amateur theater group. I loved theater, but I was not so good at acting. So, I started working on sound and lighting. Electrical engineering, at that time, was the best choice to satisfy both needs.



FIGURE 1 – Prof. Maria Ines Valla.

**Lo Bello:** Recalling your experience as a woman in engineering, what challenges did you have to face?

*Valla:* As a woman in engineering, I have faced a lot of challenges. There were very few ladies studying electrical engineering during the 1970s. I've heard more than one professor say I might be very good in mathematics but that I would never be a good engineer. Nevertheless, I got the Best Student Award in Electronics Engineering in 1979. I will never forget the time of receiving the award. The professor presenting the ceremony said only, "Maria Valla is a perfect example that Schopenhauer was wrong about women's brains," referring to a quote, attributed to the German philosopher, that describes women as animals with long hair and short-sight-

ed vision. I was fortunate, I've worked a lot, but in the meantime, I have found good professors and good mentors who helped me a lot to get ahead.

**Lo Bello:** Are such challenges still in place for women in engineering today, or are most of them over?

*Valla:* Honestly, I believe that most of the challenges are still present. We have very few women students in electrical engineering.

**Lo Bello:** Did you find a mentor? If so, how much was it helpful? If not, how did you manage to go through the challenges?

*Valla:* As I said before, I was very fortunate to encounter some excellent men who helped me a lot. First, I want to mention Prof. Huner Fanchiotti, who showed me there was a chance for doing scientific research in engineering. Moreover, he was the professor who explained to me the importance of be-

coming an IEEE Member, and therefore, I joined IEEE in 1979, as a Student Member. Later on, Carlos Christiansen was my mentor and advisor during my early years at the university. We worked together for almost 30 years (until his retirement). We made a lot for the recognition of research in engineering within the National Research Council. In addition, we did great work establishing Ph.D. studies in electrical engineering in Argentina. Finally, I'm grateful to Prof. Giuseppe Buja from the University of Padua, in Italy, whom I visited and worked with in the late 1980s. He

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offered me the opportunity to have international recognition. He was also the person who introduced me to volunteering for IEEE and the IES, in particular.

**Lo Bello: Have you been mentoring other female students so far?**

*Valla:* During 40 years of academic work, I have mentored several women in different ways, conducting their studies, their research, and their theses, but I have also given advice to female colleagues.

**Lo Bello: Maria, do you have a message or a recipe for our female students and younger colleagues to foster their participation and encourage them?**

*Valla:* My message is very simple: just trust your feelings and go ahead, and please identify the people who are helping you. My own experience within IEEE is a very good example.

In 1988, I published my first paper in *IEEE Transactions on Industrial Electronics (TIE)*. By 1989, I earned a fellowship to study with Prof. Buja in Italy. He introduced me to volunteering for IEEE, becoming a reviewer for *TIE*, and, later, participating in the organization of the 1994 Annual Conference of the IEEE Industrial Electronics Society, in Bologna. Once back in Argentina, in 1992, I was cofounder of the IES Joint Chapter in Argentina (which received the Best Chapter award from the IEEE Control Systems Society in 1999, while I was the chair).

Later, I was more involved in the IES, becoming chair of the Student Activities Committee (2000–2003), Region

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9 membership coordinator (2004–2009), vice-president for membership activities (2010–2012), coeditor-in-chief of *TIE* (2013–2018), and so on. I became an IEEE Fellow in 2010. I am the only active IEEE Fellow in Argentina (only two men have received this distinction there). Also, today, I'm the only IEEE female Fellow in Region 9.

**Lo Bello: Thank you, Maria, for sharing this with us. You are a really successful woman in engineering, and I am sure this interview will inspire and encourage many women who are pursuing their studies and careers in electrical engineering and in the other fields relevant to the IES.**



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