

Widening WiRES

by Francesca Sperotti and Paolo Tomassetti

WiRES. In one word two issues – women and renewable energy sector – tackled together in the project with one aim: analyzing the role of social dialogue in boosting female employment and enhancing women workers conditions in Renewable Energy Sector (RES). Indeed, the social partners at an international, national and company level face the challenge to prevent that typical gender unbalances, existing within the labour market, will not be replicated in the renewable energy sector. The WiRES final conference held in Brussels on 23rd of November was thought to discuss such a theme, rounding off the project and disseminating the research results among the WiRES partners, EU institutions and social partners onboard. The renewable energy sector is a sector that has been identified as strategic for combating climate change and increasing the EU's energy efficiency. Indeed, the Climate and Energy Package sets the target of reaching 20% of EU energy consumption coming from renewable by 2020. Moreover, this is a sector in which the EU not only predicted the creation of one million jobs (European Commission, *Citizens' summary of the EU Climate and Energy Package*, 2008) but also started to encourage women participation, as it appears in the recent *Strategy for gender equality between women and men 2010-2015* (European Commission, 21 September 2010). These goals have been further stressed by the European Parliament which, by emphasizing the crisis will have the worst effect on women (European Parliament, *Resolution of 17 June 2010 on gender aspects of the economic downturn and financial crisis*, in *Adapt Bulletin*, 2010, n. 21), calls on the EU and the Member States to give higher priority to “green jobs” for women, taking into account of the fact that the European Social Fund finances training projects in areas such as renewable energy (European Parliament, *Resolution of 7 September 2010 on developing the job potential of a new sustainable economy*, in *Adapt Bulletin*, 2010, n. 30). This is a great challenge considering that the geography of renewables' development varies across the EU and female workers are strongly under-represented in the renewables sector and especially in science and technology-intensive jobs.

The shift towards a low-carbon economy may entail opportunities also for the female workforce. To enable women to catch these opportunities, it is necessary to provide them with the right skills, the proper working conditions, and enjoyable career perspectives. Ad hoc social dialogue processes and structures covering the renewable energy sector as such might be a first step to make this transition an opportunity for women workers too. This would also help future generations to make conscious choices in line with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, which calls on Member States to ensure that each citizen has the key competences to adapt flexibly to a changing world in which everything is highly interconnected (Council of The European Union, *Council conclusions on education for sustainable development*, 3046th Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting, Brussels, 18 and 19 November 2010, in *Adapt Bulletin*, 2010, n. 42).

In one year project the WiRES research highlighted that there is a lack of specific social dialogue experiences in RES. Although it is part and parcel of the macro sector of energy, the renewable energy sector needs to be addressed with proper instruments, owing to its expanding production capacity. It is not a surprise that there are still significant barriers hindering both access and participation of women in RES. As the research pointed out, the female workforce often lacks of

skills and expertise required to filling the related job profiles. In addition to these access' difficulties, traditional cultural and organizational hurdles – in terms of work-life balance, gender pay gap, occupational segregation, ceiling class, work-related-stress etc. – involves scant interest for women in this sector, as well as in those featured by the same employment conditions. As a result, women are not ready to take advantages of the opportunities offered by the ecological conversion/evolution of the economy.

Moreover, gender stereotypes deepen gender segregation. There is a stereotype that women are not technologists and that they are not capable (even when provided with appropriate support) of building, operating and maintaining sophisticated technologies. As a consequence, choices of educational paths are influenced and women continue to work in jobs and sectors which are often lower valued and lower paid than those where men are the majority. Against this background, social partners have a role to play, that they can not afford to misfire.

In order to make the sector more accessible and more attractive towards women, social partners are called to support, first of all, vocational education and training in parallel with the anticipation and forecasting of future skills needs for WiRES. Secondly, they are called to play a key role in promoting gender mainstreaming for policies to make renewable energy sector more women friendly by guaranteeing a better reconciliation between work and private life. Thirdly, stereotype views may be eradicated by taking awareness actions and disseminating information about the opportunity offered by a green career.

Definitely the abovementioned recommendations are not at all easy tasks to cope with. But the renewable energy sector is expanding at a rapid pace and social partners will therefore have increasing room to make their voice heard. WiRES expect to hear them shouting!

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