

Green jobs: are women in?

di Lisa Rustico

Experts claim there are many green jobs and their number is likely to grow in the years to come. Renewable energies, energy efficiency, construction, transports, and agriculture are just some of the sectors where people are going to be able to find an eco-friendly job.

Many new green jobs for everybody, researchers and politicians say.

Yet, behind bright promises, old vices hide. Only a few people questioned indeed whether green jobs be “pink” jobs, i.e. an opportunity also for women workers.

This is the question addressed by the seminar organized by Adapt – Association for International and Comparative Studies in Labour Law and Industrial Relations (www.adapt.it) – in collaboration with Gi Group Green economy and Gi Group Academy, on the 16 July 2010 in Milan. The event lied within the scope of WiRES – Women in Renewable Energy Sector – the international research project, led by Adapt and co-financed by the European Commission. WiRES investigates what social dialogue can do to ease and support the transformation to a greener labour market in renewable energies and, at the same time, to guarantee that it is gender sustainable.

The event brought together some of the supporters of WiRES, namely Enel Green Power, Flaei Cisl and the National Counsellor for Gender Equality at Work, Ms. Alessandra Servidori. Thanks to their precious contributions and Gi Group’s experience in green jobs, the audience engaged in a lively debate.

The red thread linking the discussants and the guest speakers was training, as a key strategy in enabling the shift to a lower carbon economy. Training should not be taken as a panacea but as a strategic lever to ensure workers – women included – be ready for the new – green – jobs. Effective training supply should be widespread at the local level, organized in-company and on-the-job, so as to address companies skills needs just in time and in order to rapidly adapt to technological changes. Training should be managed by green enterprises that, nowadays, hardly find properly qualified and trained people. And this entails the dramatic phenomenon of skills mismatch, both at the entry stage of the labour market and when it comes to workers’ retraining.

At the WiRES seminar, apprenticeship was mentioned among the practical tools, women workers and companies could benefit from in order to make the labour market greener, without necessarily making it less pink. Apprenticeship is the oldest labour contract in Europe and it is widespread in many of the EU Member States. It integrates learning and working, by providing young people a high quality option to enter the labour market, by also gaining a qualification. However, gender imbalances still affect also those performing under apprenticeship contracts, as this contractual scheme is mainly used either in vocational education and training paths (for instance in Germany and Austria) or as a low-cost contract in highly specialized and technical professions, which do not attract women.

In Italy, apprenticeship holds an extraordinary potential, as it can be used in three different typologies. Firstly, apprenticeship is a path to meet the right-duty to education and training, from 15 to 18 years old: a qualification of the secondary-school is gained on the job, as a part of a training program. This typology is nowadays applicable only in a region in Northern Italy (Lombardia). Secondly, apprenticeship can be used to hire young people from 18 to 29 years old, in order to learn a job and a professional qualification, recognized by collective agreements. The third typology of

apprenticeship allows carrying out tertiary studies (a Bachelor's or Master's degree, including a PhD) being hired by a company, who's responsible of the apprentice's training, together with a University. All three typologies of apprenticeship could represent, in Italy, a valuable tool also for young women to learn a job, a green jobs, in renewable energy sector.

However, Emilio Luongo (Gi Group Green Economy) remarked that firms usually do not look for graduates but for people with technical skills, who are able to speak English and are available to build their "green" job profile. Moreover, companies need people who are available to move for work, leave for missions, who accept to carry out their job also in uncomfortable conditions. This can be a reason why women, who nowadays outpace men in education and training, could be displaced by green jobs opportunities.

Research lags behind on these topics. And, maybe, some preliminary questions should be answered: what are 'green jobs'? How does training for green jobs look like? And, first and foremost, are women interested and willing in engaging in green sectors? What are the market failures, which could hamper their participation to the new opportunities? Can social partners do anything about that?

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