

Decoding Brussels

Briefing note on the outcomes
of the “[Leveraging Women's Skills in the Energy Sector](#)” event

More women on board, please!

June 2024

Background

The energy transition is moving fast. Renewables will transform the global power mix through 2027, becoming the largest source of electricity, according to the [International Energy Agency](#). At the same time, electrification is also advancing in sectors like vehicles, heating, and cooling. Without any doubt, energy transition is gaining momentum. Correspondingly, as the deployment of renewable energy is advancing, so does the demand for labour and skills in the energy sector. But if there is no skilled workforce to fulfill the jobs that are brought by the energy transition process, then we are clearly facing a bottleneck. The question is where to find possible solutions and how to ensure that women are getting the opportunities that come with the energy transition?

The EU is taking the lead. But is this enough?

The issue of underrepresentation of women in the energy sector is very well acknowledged. There is an agreement at both, the EU decision-making and stakeholders' levels, that there is a **fundamental urgency in attracting more female employees** as the energy transition is speeding up and the lack of skills is a real challenge in today's labour market. According to [IRENA](#), women account for 48% of the global labour force. However, only 22% of the labour force is female in the oil and gas sector and 32% in renewables. Moreover, the European Patent Office's World Patent Statistical Database [reports](#) that in the patent classes associated with the energy sector, such as combustion apparatus or engines for example, women are listed in less than 11% of applications, and over 15% for climate change mitigation technologies compared to all technologies, including information and communication technologies. Furthermore, in the start-up area of energy sector founders, only about 11% are female compared with 20% across all sectors (except for consumer goods).

When we look at existing initiatives and projects at the EU level, we can fairly say that the EU is addressing this issue through different actions. Experts agree that there is already a wide range of European initiatives and projects that help create stakeholder networks from regional to international level, exchange good practices, increase transparency through data, and also provide dedicated funding instruments. Some concrete examples are:

- ✓ the [European Pact for Skills in the renewable energy sector](#), which recognises that attracting more women to clean energy-related jobs and retaining them in technical and STEM fields would fill vacancies in the job market while including women;

- ✓ the [European Year of Skills](#), which highlighted the challenges of today's European labour market and mainstreamed the issue of skills across the policy-making process;
- ✓ the most recent [EU Net Zero Industry Act](#) introduces the creation of Net-Zero Industry Academies that will provide guidance and coordination to Member States regarding the organisation of inclusive training and education on net-zero technologies. Via these Academies, the European Commission will be able to collect data on the number of women who participate in these training programmes provided via the above-mentioned Academies across Europe;
- ✓ the [Equality Platform for the energy sector](#) provides a forum for stakeholders to discuss and exchange best practices among other equality issues on how to advance the gender agenda in the energy sector.

In the next step, if we look at the company level, concrete social partner agreements between employers and trade unions in the energy sector complement the efforts made at the EU level. One example in this sense is the [European Agreement on professional equality in ENGIE](#) which was signed in 2017, thanks to the efforts of trade unions. This Agreement goes beyond recruitment, training and career development and also addresses gender-neutral parental leave or equal pay for equivalent qualifications and positions. On the one hand, there is a positive trend in this sense, as companies are becoming increasingly committed to gender matters in the search for labour. **Women's representation is also a business case.** The dynamics of today's labour market show that companies put gender policies in place because they cannot progress and extend their workforce without delivering diversity and gender inclusiveness. On the other hand, there is still work to be done in the private sector as well when it comes to hiring policies and making their personnel – and in particular human resources departments - aware of existing stereotypes. For example, when looking for talent at job fairs, company representatives must think beyond stereotypes (like women are less interested in the energy sector or that energy sector is a field of male labor and expertise) and bear in mind the gender dimension when attracting the female workers as well when it comes to filling vacancies in the energy sector. One could start with job postings and descriptions that would exclude biased phrasing (like using "he" as the default pronoun, for instance), train hiring managers and HR teams on how to write and present inclusive job ads that appeal to a diverse pool of candidates, including female, etc. Furthermore, working conditions are also an important factor that plays a significant role in attracting women to the energy sector. Very often it is not only about providing proper working conditions to attract qualified female employees (like ensuring equal pay and a work-life balance for both women and men), but also about keeping them in the company for longer and having gender-appropriate work culture that promotes equality, diversity, and inclusion, ultimately benefiting all employees and the company as a whole. This is a component that is hardly mentioned in debates about the gender dimension in the job market but necessary measures must be found in this area as well.

The Spanish way towards women's inclusion in renewable energy

Spain's National Energy and Climate Plan ([NECP](#)) is so far, the only one that includes initiatives to address gender disparities in the energy sector. Beyond the recognition of the underrepresentation of women in this industry, the Spanish government aims to create more inclusive opportunities as part of its broader energy transition strategy. The energy transition in Spain is moving remarkably fast, as it has a booming renewable energy market. Yet, in terms

of employment - as of March 2022 - women constituted only [18.2%](#) of the renewable energy labour market. Half of these women who entered the industry were holding administrative roles, with a much lower percentage holding the most qualified technical positions. The Naturgy Foundation, in conjunction with the Spanish Institute for Just Transition, initiated a comprehensive [study](#) analysing the role of women in the energy industry that provided the first in-depth diagnosis of the gender issue in the sector. The [Spanish Photovoltaic Union \(UNEF\)](#), the dominant sectoral association of solar energy in Spain, took a concrete step and committed itself to the “full and equal integration of women throughout the photovoltaic value chain”, and implementing policies that eliminate discrimination and inequality. One of the key strategies is their public awareness campaigns aimed at challenging stereotypes and encouraging more women to pursue careers in the energy field. These campaigns feature the achievements of women in the industry and emphasize a more inclusive image of the sector. For example, UNEF launched a guide called “100 Mujeres Solares” ([100 Solar Women](#)) that highlights the contributions of women in the photovoltaic industry, providing visibility and recognition to female professionals and leaders in the sector. Additionally, UNEF supports gender equality through their *Seal of Excellence in Sustainability*, which promotes projects that meet high standards of social and environmental integration and highlights gender equality and the inclusion of women in all stages of photovoltaic projects. Last but not least, in general terms, several ministries and public bodies in Spain, including the Ministry of Science and Innovation, have implemented gender equality plans. Specifically, the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT) has introduced a Gender Equality Accreditation Seal to recognize public research centers and institutions that demonstrate a strong commitment to gender equality. This initiative encourages institutions to adopt best practices in promoting gender equality. Overall, evidence shows there has been progress made in the past years. Nevertheless, these initiatives had so far, a **limited impact on concrete labour market figures** and statistics are showing that there is still difficulty in attracting women in clean tech and renewable energy sectors. So how to overcome these persisting challenges?

Potential solutions

Better access to finances, instead of more regulation

If we look first at the European level, we can naturally ask ourselves if the EU can do more. And the answer to that is not that simple. The EU’s role on this topic lies in the facilitation of mutual learning and providing funding opportunities, rather than initiating new regulations. Its hands are often tied when it comes to robust legislation in the labour market and education sector, as legally speaking Member States are usually in the lead and have more power in this direction. In this sense, very often European institutions are more leaning towards the option of **providing funding for project ideas**, instead of coming up with new legislation. A specific case is the launch of the [ERASMUS-EDU-2024-POL-EXP-VET](#) call for proposals within the Erasmus+ Programme, which provides funding for projects that develop ways to attract women to and increase the participation of women in the Net-Zero Technology sector. Another example is the [Women TechEU](#) programme which aims to elevate women in the energy and scientific industries. This EU-funded programme supports 50 female-led deep-tech startups through financial support, mentorship, and coaching.

The above-mentioned programmes are timely and relevant. Nevertheless, there is a push from the trade unions side to come up with a Just Transition Directive at the European level in this new legislative mandate of the EU that would include qualification and gender-specific issues.

Improving communication

How to better communicate the existing projects and platforms? This has also been identified as an issue. There are different websites and funding instruments that are managed by different departments of the European Commission and it is well aware of this. A change in this direction has been implemented through the creation of the [Pact of Skills website](#) where all the information needed on this topic can be found on this one single page. The plan is to implement this approach in other areas as well in the future.

“Soft” power in the hydrogen sector

When it comes to the representation of women in the hydrogen sector specifically, the situation is not better. There is a low number of women not only in business positions, and engineering vacancies but also women participating in panel discussions at events on energy transition in general. However, some concrete steps have been made in this direction as well. For example, an association and a database of women working in the hydrogen sector have been created, called [Women in Green Hydrogen](#), which aims to promote female speakers in panel discussions and provide opportunities for women in terms of mentorship programmes. This way the organisers of events can have access to a pool of female experts that could be invited to take part in panel discussions.

Focusing on trainers

The **lack of trainers is also a practical issue**. The EU, as well as private companies, are often setting up specific training schemes and then discover that the pool of trainers on subjects like energy transition or hydrogen technology applications is very small so the lack of qualified workforce that can train the next pool of talents, including women, is a real challenge. The set-up of public-private partnerships to fund and develop comprehensive training programs could be a solution in this sense and help extend the offers of training for potential workforce, including the female one.

Strengthening the multi-stakeholder approach

There is a need to **work together at all levels**: EU, national, local, private companies, and trade unions. At the EU level, it is important to keep exchanging experiences and help stakeholders design and implement concrete programmes in this direction. Brussels can provide a platform in this sense, but action must be targeted beyond this as well. A concrete example in this sense is the setup of the Erasmus Mundus master's degree in Hydrogen Systems and Enabling Technologies ([HySET](#)) with support from EU institutions and national educational stakeholders.

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