



# The European Union Steel Industry: Experiences of Diversity and Equal Opportunities

The socio-demographic profile of the European steel industry workforce is developing, in parallel with other industry developments, and there is much potential for further change. This briefing paper provides a summary of the findings of the EDLESI research programme. The paper highlights the main issues facing the industry with regard to its equality and diversity situation, particularly with in relation to the employment of women, black and minority ethnic and migrant workers, disabled workers and different generations of worker.



The European steel industry is predominantly characterised by a mature, male, local and often unqualified workforce. However, retirement, redundancy and wider industry developments mean that such workers will increasingly begin to exit the industry, and

space will be opened up for the recruitment of more highly qualified men *and* women of different and diverse backgrounds. This set of developments raises questions for the industry in relation to gender, ethnicity, disability, generation and occupational and qualification profiles. In particular, it brings into view a number of issues the industry faces with regard to diversity and equal opportunity. These include:

**Industry Awareness:** There is a poor awareness of equality and diversity issues among management and across the steel industry workforce, including those organisations that represent workers.

- With few exceptions there is an absence of equal opportunities policy across the industry.
- Management and worker knowledge of equality issues, such as equal treatment and discriminatory practice, is limited.
- Steel workforces tend to receive no training on equality and diversity issues, from either the company or trade unions.
- Information or training on equality issues is often no more than an implicit part of company or trade union training programme that deals with other separate issues. This

feature was evident, for example, in company disciplinary procedures, as well as on how to deal with complaints from workers.

- Management and trade unions collect little data that is relevant to equal opportunities issues or at least do not consider the data they do collect in ways that promote reflection on such issues.
- There is little debate between workers, unions and management on equal opportunities policy, and where there is debate, it reveals a limited awareness of initiatives and policies, such as gender mainstreaming, equal treatment, positive action or the various EU equality directives.

**Corporate Policies and Rules:** EU directives on equality and diversity are being transposed in uneven ways, across member states, with implications for equal opportunities policies and practices at country and company level.

- At a national level, EU member states are at various stages with regard to adopting EU directives, with more recent member states some way behind more established members. The uneven way in which EU directives are transposed and enforced has implications for how equal opportunities are addressed within the industry from company to company and from country to country.
- In a number of countries there are regulations (labour codes) that prevent, for example, the

engagement of women in some tasks or bar their employment in some posts, with obvious implications for equal opportunities and equal treatment. It is in this context that there is an almost entire absence of company policy or regulation in relation to equal opportunities across the European steel industry. Some companies rely on national legislation rather than making reference to or developing company specific policies.

- While trade unions across Europe have developed comprehensive equal opportunity policies, at a company level there is often a failure to contribute to such issues. For trade unions, the traditional composition of steel workforces, at least in terms of being predominantly male, has meant that such issues have not been addressed in a vigorous way.

**Occupational Segregation:** Evidence suggests that some groups experience occupational (horizontal and vertical) segregation within the industry.

- Women and migrant workers working within the steel industry are often restricted to occupations outside the production process or within particular parts of the production process. Progression through the occupational hierarchy for these groups also tends to be limited.
- Mature workers might experience occupational segregation. For example, progression through the industry has traditionally been based on experience, but it is increasingly

becoming based on merit and qualifications. Mature workers often lack qualifications, which may result in them being marginalised from such opportunities.

**Bullying/Mobbing and Harassment:** One very difficult issue involves bullying or mobbing and harassment. The first point to note is that from company to company, and more generally, from country to country, there are very different assessments and definitions of bullying/mobbing and harassment.

- On occasion, such behaviour is not publicly recognised, while in other cases there is no more than a formal acknowledgement that such behaviour could and does occur.
- There is evidence that suggests that whilst bullying or mobbing and harassment (sexual or otherwise) is not endemic within the industry, there are occurrences of this type of behaviour.
- Bullying or mobbing and harassment are experienced by members of the steel workforce, but both management and victims of this behaviour seem, in most cases, reluctant to acknowledge its existence.
- Whilst many – but not all – companies possess a code of conduct for employees (whether explicit or implicit within, for example, the contract of employment), bullying and harassment issues seem to be almost systematically ignored.

**Work/Life Balance (WLB):** The steel industry faces a set of external pressures for the introduction of WLB arrangements, in particular those related to the application of European laws on employment equality; pressures to which the industry largely fails to respond. The industry also faces a series of internal pressures to adopt WLB arrangements, which it responds to in uneven ways. The pressure for such arrangements to be introduced is likely to come to the fore as the composition of the workforce develops beyond its traditional profile.

- Questions relating to work/life balance are complex and differentiated in terms of position within the industry.
- For production workers the nature of steel work and the way it is organised makes it difficult to introduce flexible working arrangements. Whilst the particularities of most shift systems provide limited opportunities for flexibility, particularly for part-time shift working, some innovations in shift systems (e.g. 12 hour shifts in the UK) may offer greater possibilities for WLB.
- Twenty-four hour/seven day week production runs and the very nature of the work itself, which requires workers to be at their work station, precludes or makes difficult the introduction of some flexible working practices. However, WLB arrangements that might be considered for production workers, have not yet been properly considered by employers.

- For administrative staff WLB arrangements are more of a possibility, but evidence of this type of arrangement is limited. The scope for home-working, part-time work and job-sharing is limited within the industry, even where these arrangements have been made for some managerial and administrative staff.
- There is a more general absence of different types of flexible working arrangements. Further, parental leave and care arrangements seemed to favour women employees, as mothers. Fathers' rights in this respect are much more circumscribed.
- The broad assessment is that work/life balance issues have yet to be fully or adequately acknowledged by the industry.

**Training:** There are specific equality and diversity dimensions to training needs.

- In some instances, it is evident that training is organised to take place after shifts, thus favouring those with few responsibilities outside work, such as the care of children or adult dependents.
- Training does not always relate to the learning experiences of workers or cater for different learning needs. For example, the difference in learning needs between younger more formally qualified workers and mature workers skilled by experience.

- Collective bargaining in the area of training is conducive to good practice.
- Training programmes currently assume that the steel workforce is homogenous, rather than diverse and differentiated in a number of critical ways. Equal access to training programmes, skills upgrading and formal qualifications is becoming critical within the context of the industry's increasing workforce diversity.

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Briefing Paper 4 is part of a series of 5 briefing papers coming out of the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme sponsored EDLESI project

- BP1: Equality and Diversity Learning in the European Steel Industry: An Executive Summary
- BP 2: The Steel Industry in the EU: Changes and Possibilities
- BP 3: Equal Opportunities Policy in the European Steel Industry.
- BP 4: sub-papers: a) Women; b) Black and Minority Ethnic and Migrant workers; c) Disabled Workers; d) Generations of workers
- BP5: Recognising and Promoting Equality and Diversity: Good Practice.

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