



The European Union Steel Industry: Women's Experiences of Diversity and Equal Opportunities

The European steel industry workforce has always included a significant minority of women. However, the employment of women within the industry has traditionally been confined to occupations outside the production process or within particular parts of the production process. More particularly, the progression of women through the occupational hierarchy has been limited. Whilst, in many ways, this remains the case, there is the clear potential for women to become a more significant part of the European steel industry production workforce. There are however, a number of gender equality issues that require addressing by the industry.

Whilst women have generally been absent from production employment, they have routinely been employed in laboratory, clerical and administrative positions, and in the domestic services (such as catering and cleaning) attached to the industry. In eastern and central Europe the position is different and the employment of women on the shop-floor is more common. For example, in Poland and the Czech Republic, women comprise between 17 and 30 per cent of the production workforce. However, these workers are mainly confined to warehouse and crane-operator occupations. More particularly, as part of restructuring programmes in central and eastern Europe, women are exiting the industry in greater numbers than men. In western Europe the converse is true, female production employment is low (between 3 and 7 per cent), but the potential for women's future

employment in production is likely to increase.

Often, the stereotypical image of steelwork as heavy, dirty and dangerous is cited as a reason for the absence of women from the production process. However, the steel industry is changing. Technological developments have radically changed the way steel is produced. There is moreover, a greater emphasis on downstream and commercial activity. Further, the industry's increasing demand for highly skilled recruits has forced the industry to re-evaluate its recruitment and retention strategies. These changes have been paralleled by societal developments, involving national government and European Union (EU) equality initiatives, which add to the potential for increased gender diversity in the composition of what is traditionally regarded as a male dominated industry.



It is increasingly likely that women will be recruited to steel production employment and there is some evidence that such developments are beginning to occur. For example, recruitment difficulties experienced by one company in the

Netherlands led it to reserve 10 per cent of apprenticeship places for women. (The company wanted to recruit good quality apprentices, but not enough male candidates could be recruited of the desired standard.) Research also indicates that as part of a shift toward increased graduate recruitment, women graduates are being increasingly employed to trainee technical and scientific positions.

The position of women within the industry is also being consolidated along more traditional routes. Increasing emphasis is being given to marketing, customer service and commercial sales within the industry bringing with it an increase in female employment. In German plants, for example, a majority of marketing and sales apprentices are women and these are translated into real posts. Even without these developments, the accession to the EU of countries where female production employment is comparatively high (for example, Poland and the Czech Republic) has led to an aggregate increase in the number of women working in steel production within the EU as a whole.



However, women employed in steel industry production areas often experience a number of problems, particularly in relation to discriminatory practices and harassment from (male) colleagues.

- It is clearly the case that instances of sexual harassment occur in the steel industry workplace. It is relatively common for steel industry employees to relate examples of

inappropriate remarks and behaviour, involving colleagues and in some instances more senior staff.

- Female production workers experience other types of harassment and bullying/mobbing, too. A programme of restructuring and rationalisation at one plant caused male workers to express open resentment at the presence of women on the shop-floor, because they are taking "men's jobs". Further, in another case, a female team-leader was accused by a team-member of achieving the position by offering sexual favours to management.
- Other evidence suggests that the terms and conditions of women's employment is often less favourable than men's – even for like-for-like employment. For example, women in steel employment experienced:
 - unequal pay for the same job tasks as men;
 - problems returning to their job following maternity leave;
 - poor encouragement for career advancement (particularly related to interrupted careers for maternity leave);
 - unfavourable terms when requesting flexible working arrangements.

Discriminatory practices and harassment within the industry is exacerbated by the absence and implementation of policy to protect and ensure equal opportunities for women.

For further information contact:

Dr Dean Stroud (Project Manager)
StroudDA1@cardiff.ac.uk

Prof. Peter Fairbrother (Project Co-ordinator)
FairbrotherPD@cardiff.ac.uk

<http://idec.gr/edlesi/>

SEPTEMBER 2007