

The Biggest Barrier I Had to Face as a Woman Working in the Ecological Transition in the Mediterranean

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Even if a woman is born in a developed country, in the bosom of a respectful family that educates her to become what she sets out to be, it is true that, from a young age, she will be educated in differential socialization. This involves educating boys and girls differently, so that the former receive messages that encourage them to take risks, be brave and take on leadership positions, while the education of girls focuses on care, reproduction and the private sphere. Once aware of this, women can fight to get out of their comfort zone and assume leadership that does not have to respond to authoritarian male stereotypes, but rather can be based on values, such as care, solidarity and support for other women. In this way, little by little, there will be more and more female leadership role models that will inspire the new generations of the Mediterranean.

Since I was very young and I first watched the news on TV about the abysmal inequalities that exist between countries, classes and genders, and the terrible impact that our current way of life is having on our planet, I knew I could not ignore these problems. I wanted to dedicate my life to making a positive change, fighting for social justice and protecting our environment. But I was just a young girl, what could I do? At that time there were still no role models like Malala or Greta Thunberg, so it was very difficult to imagine that anyone would listen to a girl like me.

I decided to get trained in something that would allow me to contribute to this positive change through my profession. I soon realized

that these big problems could not be solved by any country unilaterally. The world is dominated by private interests and rivalries; we are not able to see that we are all in the same boat, and if we do not cooperate for common goals, it will be difficult for us to keep it afloat. That's why I studied Political Science and International Development Cooperation. I knew that the current development model did not make sense. Exploiting natural resources as if they were unlimited while polluting our air, land, seas and rivers with tons of microplastics and toxic chemicals is not only destroying our ecosystems and creating a climate and biodiversity crisis (we are facing a sixth mass extinction) but is costing us our own health and quality of life.

For all these reasons, it is not surprising that I felt at home when I started working at MedWaves, the UNEP/Mediterranean Action Plan Regional Activity Center for Sustainable Consumption and Production (former SCP/RAC). We work with Mediterranean countries to promote the change towards sustainable consumption and production patterns, thus responding to the mandate of the Barcelona Convention to protect the marine environment and the Mediterranean coastal region. After all, as the saying goes “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. The truth is that not generating pollution in the first place would be much more effective than cleaning all the pollution that we continuously create. This may seem like a utopia but it is getting closer to being a reality thanks to concepts such as the circular economy, in which waste and pollution are eliminated by design, products and materials are kept in use for as long as possible, and natural ecosystems are regenerated (for example, by returning nutrients from organic matter to nature through compost). The ecological transition in the Mediterranean, in addition to applying the circular economy, must be based on renewable energy and taking into account social justice. In this way, we will simultaneously address the triple environmental crisis (climate change, loss of biodiversity, and pollution) and the social and economic crises, which above all affect women and young people.

My work within the MedWaves Center, specifically, is as a Project Manager in the policy area, where we support policy-makers in the Mediterranean region at all levels (from local to national) to stimulate environments that favor the establishment of green, circular, zero-waste, low carbon and non-toxic economies. I am also proud to be part of the Center’s gender task force, which aims to analyze all current activities and processes at the Center and design a strategy to ensure that all our actions contribute to reducing gender inequalities in

the Mediterranean. Despite the fact that it has existed for less than a year and we are still at the beginning of this mission, I am comforted to see that more and more organizations like ours are mainstreaming gender equality in their programs, and it doesn’t just stop at nice speeches or some occasional activity for women.

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Just looking at the data in the Mediterranean region is enough to realize that the problem of gender inequality has very negative consequences, affecting all countries to a greater or lesser extent. For example, the labor participation rates of women in the Southern Mediterranean region are still among the lowest in the world, below 33% (SOED, 2020). According to the World Bank, achieving gender equality for the current generation of working-age women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region could add up to \$5.1 trillion (USD) to regional wealth. But the benefits would not only be economic, women are part of the solution to environmental and social problems. The region cannot achieve a successful transition to a green and circular economy without the active participation of half of its population. Female workers, entrepreneurs and researchers contribute to innovation and economic prosperity. Their participation is crucial to the development of a sustainable and inclusive economy in the region.

Unfortunately, women continue to face a multitude of barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential. Perhaps in the Southern Mediterranean countries cultural and social barriers have more weight and are more evident than in the Northern countries, but even in the latter there are significant barriers for women to reach leadership positions, such



Women at a meeting (Christina Wocintech).

as gaps in hiring and internal promotions, and a persistent gender pay gap.

And this is where we come to the title of this article. As there are already quite a few reports with data on gender inequality, I considered that instead of just talking about them in general terms, perhaps it would be useful to share my personal experience as a woman working for the ecological transition in the Mediterranean. Of course, each woman's situation is different, so surely many women will never have experienced anything like what I am going to explain. However, I do believe that it may be an experience shared by some of us, and if this article can help other women to identify this barrier and try to overcome it whenever it arises, I will consider myself satisfied.

So when I think about the barriers that I have encountered to reach my goal of working on something that I am passionate about, in this case in the ecological transition, I think that I have had it relatively easy compared to many women. I have been lucky enough to grow up in a society and in a family that supported gender equality and encouraged me to study and become what I wanted, something that is not necessarily the case of many women. It is also true that it was a rather humble family and they did not always have the resources to support me or the "contacts" that other families may have, but again I have been lucky enough to be born in a rich country that is a member of the European Union and has an extensive program of scholarships and grants, so it was enough for me to get good grades and always