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Article

Different Shades of Green: An Analysis of the Occupational Health and Safety Risks Faced by Wind Farm Workers

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Abstract: The growth of the wind power sector has been marked by environmental, economic, and political drivers. Its starring role is also visible in the emergence of the so-called “green jobs”. Notwithstanding, its evolution ought not to compromise issues related to occupational risks. This exploratory study examines psychosocial risks in the operation and maintenance of onshore wind turbines in a leading Portuguese company. We conducted interviews with main stakeholders (Human Resources, OHS professionals, and team leaders); developed an “activity diary” for the operation and maintenance technicians to describe their activity and perceived impacts on health, complemented with collective interviews; and applied the Work and Health Survey. The results revealed particular risks and health impacts: working under adverse weather conditions; working at heights and in confined spaces; spending long work hours inside of the nacelles to achieve an optimum balance between favorable wind slots to intervene and avoiding additional trips up and down the wind turbines without lifts (70m-120m); and the feeling of early ageing. At a time when these workers are striving for recognition of their profession as a “rapid wear profession”, it is a key moment to discuss these results to guarantee sustainable conditions for future generations of workers.

Keywords: green jobs; wind turbines; psychosocial risks; health-related risks; work sustainability

1. Introduction

1.1. Green and sustainable purposes for the environment, but what about the workers?

Combating climate change and investing in renewable energy is a societal challenge and one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 7), as envisaged by the United Nations [1]. Nevertheless, according to our scientific tradition of work psychology and activity ergonomics [2,3], work activity cannot be a forgotten component in the framework of projects aimed at reconciling economic development and environmental sustainability.

The work activity of operation and maintenance (O&M) technicians in the wind power sector is the privileged focus of our analysis. The wide expansion of the wind sector in both the international and national context has been marked by factors of environmental, economic and political nature, which pursue a new paradigm regarding energy production [4]. Such a paradigm is reinforced by: (i) the European Climate Law - Regulation (EU) 2021/1119 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 June 2021 [5] - and national strategic plans, such as the Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan 2021-2030 [6]; (ii) the consolidation of economic confidence in the face of the inexhaustible nature and reduced environmental impact of these energies [7,8]; and (iii) the introduction of technological innovation in the sector (e.g. turbines with more efficient technological solutions) [9].

The evolution of the wind sector has been reflected in the growth of its employment rate. In Portugal, between 2014 and 2018, among the renewable energy sources, the wind sector was the main responsible for job creation (48%, corresponding to about 22426 jobs), with the projection that, between 2020 and 2030, there will be an increase of over 15 500 jobs [9].

However, despite the categorization of these jobs as “green jobs”, i.e., “jobs with a green purpose”, in the sense that they contribute to the preservation of the environment and the transition to the “bioeconomy” [10,11], this is not synonymous to having working conditions which safeguard the health and safety of its protagonists. That is to say, the commitment between different sustainable development goals is not self-evident: how to ensure investment in renewable energies (SDG 7) and the creation of sustainable working conditions (SDG 8) for those involved in their production and maintenance, throughout their professional paths?

As stated by some authors, the working conditions under which these jobs are performed require further analysis, as well as the risks to which workers are exposed, focusing on primary prevention [12]. According to the EU-OSHA [4], it is legitimate to speak of “emerging risks”, which are both “new” and “increasing” (even a long-standing occupational issue is considered a new risk due to the change in social or public perceptions) [13], associated with the activity in this sector; even knowing that some risks are not specific (e.g., working at height and in limited spaces), the environment and the situations under which they occur (e.g., extreme weather conditions, isolated areas) make them necessarily unique [14]. Considering that there are grey areas with regard to knowledge of the risks of work activity in these types of situations, the health effects are at risk of underreporting. Some studies mention, for example, the association between wind turbines noise and sleep problems [12], or the frequent going up and down ladders (in the case of wind turbines without a lift) and musculoskeletal problems, especially in the knees [14–16], and the inhalation or absorption of hazardous agents (e.g., volatile compounds, vapours, or dust) during maintenance operations [14].

Despite the contribution of such analyses, mainly quantitative in nature, for a better understanding of the risks associated with the operation and maintenance of wind turbines, these approaches tend to be based on cross-sectional surveys without an articulation with the workers’ point of view regarding their specific expression in that context. That is, without differentiating those same risks in other sectors (it is the dialogue with these workers that allows understanding of the risk of “working at height”, knowing that such a risk, in the case of the wind sector, often implies working in suspension and carrying loads at the same time, for example). The invisibility of less tangible or measurable risk factors, such as psychosocial risk factors is, therefore, reinforced, considering its assessment is necessarily based on self-report approaches [17].

Against this backdrop, multipronged approaches are needed, as opposed to statistical analysis alone. This is precisely the specificity of the case study presented herein. It is based on the assumption of developing an approach from the activity level, and in the dialogue with the workers, in view of creating conditions to track the less visible risks and to contribute to both the improvement of their working conditions and the sustainability of professional paths which are still under development.

1.2. Research objectives

Following a request addressed by a leading company in the Portuguese market to assess the psychosocial risk factors in the operation and maintenance (O&M) of onshore wind turbines, an action-research project was developed. This analysis also sought to address the perceived health impacts of exposure to these risks and to identify intervention proposals in line with the diagnosis developed.

2. Materials and Methods

The conduction of this case study followed a heuristic methodological approach, adjusted to the singularities of the context under analysis. Reconciling different levels of analysis (a macro analysis of the sector and the company, and a micro analysis of the work activity), data were collected using complementary methods: individual and collective interviews with the company’s main stakeholders (human resources; occupational health and safety professionals; team leaders); the design of an

“activity diary” to be filled in by the O&M technicians; collective interviews with these workers (organized in team pairs in each wind farm); and the application of the INSAT - Health and Work Survey [18], as explained below. Data were collected between September 2020 and April 2021. The average age of the O&M technicians was 33.9 years (range 29-38), and their average seniority in the company was 4.1 years (range 4.2 months-14years).

The interviews with key interlocutors were dedicated to exploring the company's historical landmarks (the company was, at that time, undergoing a fusion and acquisition process by an international group) which impacted the forms of work organization, the constitution of teams, and the evolution of risks to which workers are exposed to.

Occasional observations (non-systematic, nor continuous over a long period of time) were conducted of the O&M technicians' activity, in a real work context, with ascent and permanence in the wind turbines. Nevertheless, the difficulties in collecting data related to the day-to-day activity, over a longer period of time, under these conditions (imperative to climb up/down the wind turbine towers, and stay in a limited space), justified the proposal to design another mediating instrument to gain access to what is experienced in the real work context - an “activity diary” as a daily diary methodology [19]. This “activity diary”, as we conceive it, consists of records in the first person, based on what is done in the real context (even if the report is not done in real time) and on what is experienced in that specific context, including successive records throughout a week, i.e., with a temporal breadth that allows measuring intra- and inter-individual variability. Six workers filled this diary, throughout a working week, taking into account the dimensions which follow:

- “Background to my working day” (including the wind farm where the work was being done; weather conditions; characterization of the wind turbines; type of intervention to be done; tasks performed; co-workers; and the conditions that affected the work plan).
- Work schedule (including the expected schedule and the actual one, time travelling to and from the wind farm concerned; time spent inside the machine (wind turbine); and the work pace determined by the need to attain the goals).
- “My day in review” (including “what gave me the most pleasure at work”; “what went worst”; unforeseen or critical situations; what required more expertise; and what made the work easier).
- “My health and wellbeing” (including the identification of pain and affected body areas, relating them to tasks that were done; situations of incidents/accidents; health issues that were aggravated by the work).
- “My working week in review (including the most painful day in the working week; “what went best” and why).

The “activity diary” also included an illustrative representation of a wind turbine in which the workers were requested to pinpoint the most critical points/areas of the wind turbines to work.

Collective interviews were then carried out with the O&M technicians (n = 17) of four of the wind farms considered, supported by records shared anonymously in the “activity diary”. In this context, while exploring the critical aspects associated with their work activity, the workers were asked to signal these points in a graphical representation of a wind tower, created by themselves. Figures 1 and 2 show two of these representations, which were used as mediating tools for the analysis of the workers' point of view about their activity exigencies.

Beyond the “activity diary”, the exploration of the drawings as a data collection technique in this context underpinned a heuristic approach in the conducting of this case study. The purpose of using the graphic representation of a wind turbine was to constitute it as a “common place” for dialogue within the workers' collective on dimensions of the activity that could not be observed continuously over time (the analysis of risks in situ), nor would they be spontaneously verbalized in the absence of this symbolic reference to their work situation. Furthermore, the use of a wind turbine representation was not intended to be a faithful representation of their workspace, but rather to serve as a mediating tool to explicit details concerning critical points of the work activity [20].

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate a graphic representation of a wind turbine with “critical points” drawn by the O&M technicians in the context of the collective interviews.

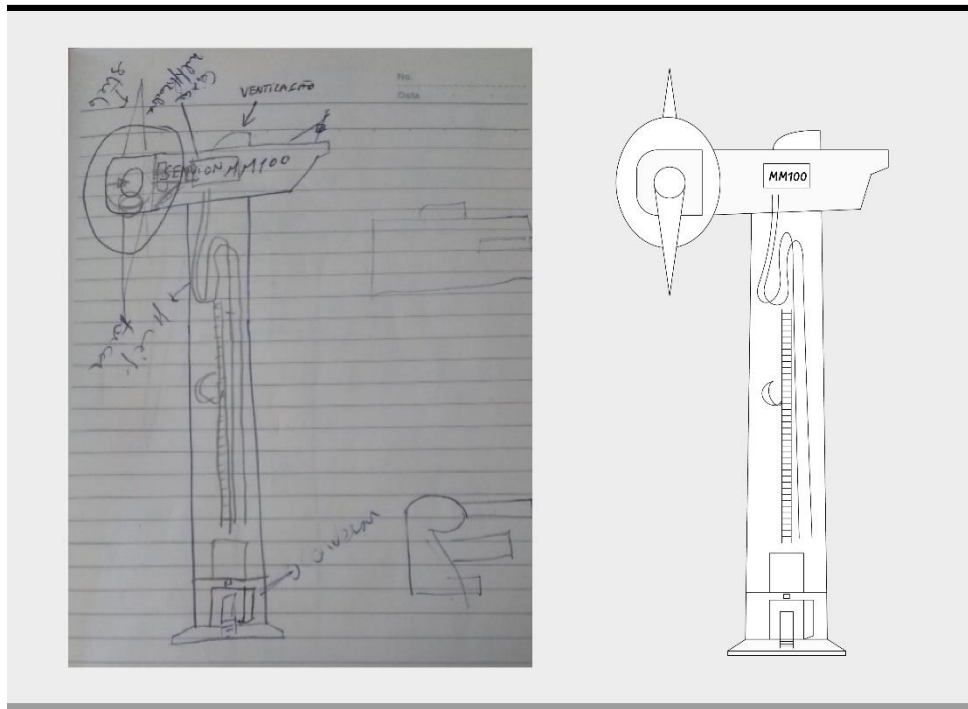


Figure 1. and 2. Graphic representation of a wind turbine with “critical points” drawn by the O&M technicians in the context of the collective interviews.

Finally, in order to explore the relationship between the perceived risk factors and the health impacts, the INSAT was used, and responses were obtained from eight O&M technicians. The data collected were analysed in an integrated way, for both complementarity and triangulation.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Activity content: interventions on onshore wind turbines

The analysis in real context and the dialogue with the O&M technicians and the team leaders supported the identification of the main risk factors and their impacts on health, in relation to the type of intervention the workers could perform in the wind farms. Here, there are three main operations: preventive maintenance; “curative” maintenance (troubleshooting); and the substitution of major components (in the wind turbines).

Operations of preventive maintenance involve procedures for monitoring and controlling the operation of the wind turbines, whose purpose is preventive in nature (e.g., technical checks, lubrication, and a set of actions to prevent breakdowns). Each wind farm has a biannual plan of preventive maintenance, which implies that these operations are programmed and planned. According to the O&M technicians: “[The preventive] *maintenance tasks are routine, it’s like the car revision. These operations have to be done at predefined intervals, it’s always the same thing for all [wind turbines], there aren’t significant differences [between the operations carried out from wind turbine to wind turbine]”*.

Operations of “curative” maintenance refer to solving breakdowns and malfunctions that occur in an unpredictable way in the wind turbines. Taking into account that these breakdowns interrupt wind energy production, solving them as fast as possible is thus crucial, which gains priority over regular and planned operations of preventive maintenance. Operations of “curative” maintenance are also done at the weekend, with three teams (three pairs) assigned on-call: *“When we’re on call at the weekend, there’s one team working in the north [of the country], another one in the south, and a backup team, six workers in total, so”*.

As for the operations involving the substitution of major turbine components, there is a team specifically devoted to carrying out these operations. It is made up of five or six workers, depending

on the type of component to be substituted (e.g., wind turbine blades; generator). These operations are programmed in advance as they require longer periods of intervention in the wind turbines due to the size of the components.

3.2. A not so green shade: the exposure to physical and psychosocial risk factors

The analysis of the O&W technicians' activity enabled the identification of specific aspects of this work that are perceived by the workers as being critical. To visually illustrate these aspects, Figure 3 summarizes different points/components and areas of a wind turbine where these critical aspects were identified, in light of the O&M technicians' point of view.

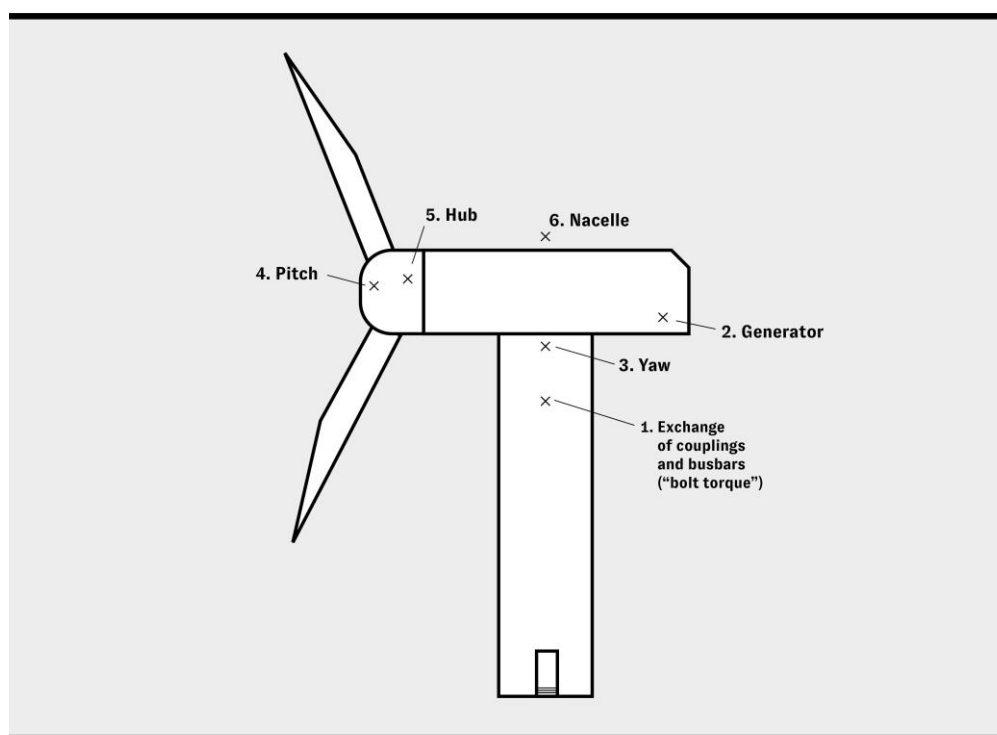


Figure 3. Representation of a wind turbine with all the “critical points” collectively identified by the O&M technicians.

One of the main critical operations regards the exchange of couplings and busbars (see Figure 3: 1-3). For example, these operations imply working through the internal ladder of the tower (at height and in suspension), requiring the adoption of awkward and painful postures (principally, in those moments which make demands for torso rotation): *“The most critical task is to change couplings and busbars, we’re on the ladder in a strained and awkward posture, we have to work in that position, in very unfavourable and unstable positions”*. Also, the bolt torque and tensioning were highlighted by the workers. Broadly speaking, this operation entails manually handling the tension heads used to test and tighten bolts (bolted joints). This operation is performed mainly in limited spaces (e.g., in the hub or the internal ladder of the tower), leading to the adoption of a variety of awkward and painful postures (whilst standing, kneeling, or seated depending on the dimension of the workspace). For example, as regards the position adopted on the ladder, one O&M worker stated: *“On the ladder, our body is twisted while the torque tightening, and we have to pass from one side of the ladder to the other and lag one foot”*. In a previous study, Milligan et al. [21] reported that bolt torque and tensioning is a “whole body task” (p. 542), with fatigue accumulated on the shoulders, wrists, torso and back.

The need to climb extensive ladders several times a day (in wind turbine towers without lifts) is also mentioned by the O&M workers, mainly due to the impact progressively felt on the knees: *“The worst is even when we’re going down, we felt it in our knees”*.

Tasks related to the substitution of major components are also perceived as being “critical”, and even more dangerous due to the increased risks (e.g., having to handle heavier loads). Lastly, the workers highlighted a few areas in the wind turbines that given their characteristics (in terms of access, space available, the weight of the loads handled, or the height), the tasks become more difficult, and with the exposure to different risks. Examples of these areas and components are: the generator area (see Figure 3: 4); the yaw deck, (see Figure 3: 5), the pitch (see Figure 3: 6), the hub (see Figure 3: 7) and outside the nacelle (see Figure 3: 8).

Table 1 provides an integrative overview of both physical and psychosocial risk factors (see [17] regarding the dimensions of psychosocial risk factors) that were reported by the workers. To this end, we crossed the data obtained from the interviews (n = 17) with the data collected via INSAT Survey (n = 8), and then we complemented this analysis with the control measures and other intervention proposals that are inscribed in ISSO/DIS 45003 on the management of psychosocial risks at work [22].

Table 1. Physical and psychosocial risk factors.

PHYSICAL RISK FACTORS			
DIMENSIONS	VERBATIM EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS	INSAT ANSWERS	CONTROL MEASURES (ISO/DIS 45003)
Exposure to adverse weather conditions	<i>"The weather conditions are adverse, very windy, rainy, cold (...) we have to work on maintenance with 6 °C".</i>	8/8 O&M technicians are exposed to "thermal variations (e.g., heat, cold, wind, humidity)"	Improve equipment and the work environment by avoiding or protecting exposure to physical risk factors
Working at height and in suspension	<i>"Working at height is already a big con. And it's an activity where one mistake can be fatal". "When changing the bars on the stairs (...) we have to be hanging all the time, 1h, 1h30, 2h".</i>	7/8 work "at height"	Provide and encourage the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)
Working in limited spaces	<i>"The space is very restricted, and we are in painful positions, or twisted (...) we have to walk on all fours when we take the batteries to the hub".</i>	8/8 work in a "context/place whose space is poorly adapted to the type of tasks performed (ex: restricted, poorly accessible, poorly organized space)"	
Frequent walking up and down stairs	<i>"They are machines with 70 metres and more, if there's no lift, we have to go up and down everything by hand". "The worst bit is even climbing down, you feel it in your knees".</i>	7/8 have to "going up and down very often (e.g., stairs, ramps)"	
Manual load handling	<i>"During pitch motor replacements (...) I get a bad back, because of the positions we hold it in, it's 80 kilos heavy". "Carry heavy weights to change batteries".</i>	8/8 have to "make intense physical efforts (e.g., heavy loads handled or moved)"	
Adoption of painful postures	<i>"In pitch motors replacements (...) every time I change one, my back hurts because of the positions we hold it in, it's 80 kilos, we have to walk with it on our knees, we have to bend down with it". "We have to make very abrupt movements, we have to be in positions that sometimes are not comfortable for us, for our body, for our back".</i>	8/8 "adopt painful postures (painful, costly, uncomfortable body positions)", "make repetitive gestures", "make precise and meticulous gestures"	
Contacting with moving parts of the machine	<i>"In both the yaw and the hub, all it takes is one slip and we can get stuck"</i>		
Machine vibrations	<i>"With the wind, it wobbles a lot (...) it wobbles when you're up there (...) it interferes a bit with our meticulous work". "The busbar joints in the middle of the tower can come loose with the vibration".</i>	6/8 are exposed "vibrations (oscillations or tremors in the body, or in the limbs)"	
Exposure to dangerous products and components	<i>"Chemical risks, associated with the handling of products used for cleaning". "Inhalation of dust particles coming out from the generators".</i>	8/8 work with "electrical equipment susceptible to electrocution" and "chemical products"; and are exposed to "dust or gases" 4/8 are exposed to "nanoparticles (e.g., industrial cleaning)"	

PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK FACTORS			
DIMENSIONS	VERBATIM EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS	INSAT ANSWERS	CONTROL MEASURES (ISO/DIS 45003)
Work intensification	<p><i>"Customers are demanding because of the wind. If we're in the machine for too long, customers immediately start asking why the machine is stopped".</i></p> <p><i>"We left the machine until 11 pm, since noon. That was a really hard day for us. We had lunch before going up there and that was all. Besides that, it was water, air and wind because that was the only thing we had up there."</i></p> <p><i>"Just the day before yesterday we went a bit over the normal schedule (...) at the end of the day, we got the information that we had to go to another breakdown, and it wasn't exactly next door, we were only able to get home by 8.30 pm."</i></p> <p><i>"We know at what time we start work, but we may not know the time we finish it, which sometimes impacts the management we do of our personal life".</i></p>	<p>8/8 revealed having "to work at an intense pace", "to depend on colleagues to be able to carry out my work", "to comply with strict rules and/or deadlines", "to exceed normal working hours" and "to take work home, in addition to my schedule"</p> <p>7/8 revealed "significant estrangement that interferes with family or social routine" and "make frequent work trips (absence or significant absence that interferes with family or social routine)"</p> <p>6/8 have to "skip" or shorten a meal, or not even take a break because of work</p> <p>5/8 "having to depend on direct orders from customers" and "hyper-requesting"</p>	<p>Prioritize tasks and flexible deadlines for their completion</p> <p>Limit worker contact to work beyond hours (email and phone)</p> <p>Provide support in times of greater overload (more experienced workers)</p>
Emotional demands	<p><i>"We have two hours left and we could finish the job, but the client won't let us [due to wanting to put the machine at work because of the favourable wind speed]".</i></p> <p><i>"At most, we contact one person throughout the day. So, imagine if I have my meal in the nacelle, I don't see anyone else during the whole day."</i></p> <p><i>"Doing 7 hours of travelling alone, because we are on call with a colleague who lives 350 km away from us, ends up being a little bit painful".</i></p> <p><i>"We're cut off from the world, what if we need help?"</i></p> <p><i>"In emergency and accident situations, it is difficult to get rescue teams in there".</i></p> <p><i>"At wind farm or in the machine, when we spend all day in the nacelle, the toilet is... improvised".</i></p>		<p>Minimize isolated work as much as possible, promoting access to support and social support</p>
Insufficient autonomy	<p><i>"The operator doesn't let the machines stop [because the wind speed is more advantageous for energy production]".</i></p> <p><i>"Customer contracts define wind/power thresholds (...) above 1KJ you can no longer stop".</i></p>		<p>Making workers more flexible and autonomous in managing the pace, schedule, and division of work (flexible hours)</p>
Ethical and values conflicts	<p><i>"Sometimes we do things we don't agree with (...) for example, changing all the air filter sleeves because the temperature rises and causes the machine stop" [at present, with the company fusion].</i></p>	<p>4/8 have to do things they disapprove of</p>	<p>Consult workers on work-related issues (work practices, possible changes to be introduced)</p>
Poor quality of working social relations [mainly due to the acquisition of the company by another with a different organisational culture]	<p><i>"People are getting demotivated by this work..., it's the pressure, and the lack of recognition".</i></p> <p><i>"We, at xxxxx [the worker was referring to the former company] used to have autonomy, because they trusted us. Not here, there is a lot of pressure from the leadership".</i></p> <p><i>"They command us to take photos of everything that has been done, they don't trust us".</i></p> <p><i>"Lack of recognition and personal valorization".</i></p>	<p>3/8 assumed: "I am little recognized by my colleagues"</p> <p>2/8 revealed: "I spend many hours in a space where I feel uncomfortable", "I often need help from colleagues and do not have it" and "I am not treated fairly and with respect by supervisors"</p>	<p>Promote effective supervision and constructive feedback to workers</p> <p>Promote management attitudes and encourage reporting of psychosocial risks (harassment, intimidation)</p> <p>Recognize and reward workers</p>
Work and employment insecurity	<p><i>"The xxxxxx [the worker was referring to the new company] pays less. What will happen to our wages [with the company fusion]?"</i></p> <p><i>"If something better comes along, I'll leave, I'm fed up".</i></p>	<p>4/8 indicated "there is a threat of job loss" and "career development is almost impossible"</p> <p>2/8 assumed that "the pay does not allow me to have a satisfactory standard of living" and "there are conditions that undermine my dignity"</p>	<p>Develop support measures for workers exposed to psychosocial risks</p> <p>Avoid exposure or protect workers exposed to psychosocial risk factors</p>

As far as the psychosocial risk factors are concerned, in the literature, there is a scarce body of knowledge on this topic, as the EU-OSHA [4] called attention to, reinforcing the need to look at work organization options in this sector. However, in 2013, the EU-OSHA [4] already affirmed that issues

such as working long hours, lone working or working remotely for extended periods should be considered when addressing psychosocial specificities in this work. We could observe these issues from the workers' answers (see Table 1), mainly in regard to the work intensification and emotional demands. On the intensification, the workers pointed out situations of long hours: *"Just the day before yesterday we went a bit over the normal schedule (...). At the end of the day, we got the information that we had to go to another breakdown, and it wasn't exactly next door, we were able to get home by 8.30 pm"*.

In our study, the findings related to emotional demands seem to confirm the first clues put forward by the EU-OSHA, in 2013. In fact, the O&M technicians brought to the debate factors like having to work alone (in a team of two technicians), in what the workers perceive as being apart from the world: *"We're cut off from the world, what if we need help?"* In the past, [23] looked specifically at the consequences of working alone (a pair of O&M technicians) for long periods in a wind turbine in forested areas, far from a main road, in the case of an accident. In Quebec, they revealed a series of difficulties in providing help to these workers, placed in remote areas and with weak communication signals. This issue permeates the thought of the workers participating in our study as they are working, insofar in the case of an accident or injury, it is up to the other colleague of the pair the responsibility to face the situation, for example. This is a real concern of the workers, as revealed by them.

Finally, an issue quite often disregarded is related to access to a toilet. In most cases, toilets are placed next to the control room of the wind farm. However, these workers spend long periods of time in the nacelle without access to the toilet. This fact is associated with the lack of lifts in most wind turbine towers, and the workers try to avoid descending (and then climbing the ladder again) due to the physical effort required.

3.3. The perceived impacts of work on health

The word "green" is often associated with the preservation and protection of the environment, but what is good for the environment could not be necessarily good for the safety and health of workers, as illustrated in Table 1. In the context of collective interviews, it was possible to explore the perceived health effects that stem from these working conditions and the characteristics of this work. One of the main impacts regards the musculoskeletal pain mainly associated with the fact that these workers have to climb ladders several times a day, as well as the handling of heavy loads and the performance of operations in awkward and uncomfortable positions: *"I feel it [the health impact] in my knees and back, we have to ascend and descend several times, carry tools, and expend physical efforts in positions that are not very comfortable for us"*. As stressed in the literature on this matter (e.g., [14,15,21]), these requirements place the O&M technicians at risk of musculoskeletal injuries. What is more, the workers mentioned that, on occasion, accidents during these operations occur, involving injuries such as cuts, abrasions and, at times, fractures. In spite of the relatively "emerging" nature of this sector, and even though these workers are young (most of them are in their 30s), they are already aware that this work activity could lead to premature ageing. Such a perception is expressed when the workers revealed that they do not consider to be able to perform this activity until retirement age. This assessment is based mainly on the effects they already feel in their bodies, a "professional wear" that involves loss of muscular endurance and physical abilities, but also from the testimony of older colleagues: *"I can't imagine working here till retirement, because of the physical impact"; "I've got a colleague who is 54 years old, and he no longer does some tasks"*.

Not only health impacts, but this work activity also impacts the difficulties associated with work-family balance. As there are breakdowns in the turbine towers that imply exceeding the work schedule (e.g., to avoid a return to the wind turbine concerned the next day, mainly when it does not have a lift to ascend), this will also have further implications on their perceived well-being: *"A breakdown requiring more time than the 8 hours interferes with the planning of our life outside of work"; "Sometimes, there're operations that require from us a further effort. Look, we don't have on the regular schedule, from Monday to Friday, from time to time, there're weekends in which we are on-call. And some operations on the weekends could take several hours into the night"*.

3.4. Study Limitations

As a limitation of this study, we would like to point out the lack of peer-reviewed scientific literature on occupational risks and health impacts in the wind farm sector, especially those following a participatory and worker-centered approach. This issue further limited the insights into how occupational health in a relatively recent industry can impact workers' professional paths. Moreover, the analysis of a small sample of workers in this study and the lack of comparative data in literature covering a longer time period seem to reinforce the knowledge gap concerning the health impacts of this work activity and the employment sustainability in this industry.

4. Conclusions: a “rapid wear profession” vs a ‘green job’

The missive of sustainable development, with renewable energies, boosted the increase of wind farms, and the so-called “green” jobs. However, what is debated in the concrete work activity, the risks that are inherent to it, and the sustainability of the conditions in which it is developed have not had the same awareness. Recently, in Portugal, these workers have organised themselves in order to start a process of recognition of their profession as a “rapid wear profession”. As one of the interviewed workers said “We’re the first, we are the first generation of this profession. I don't believe that we can do this activity for many years... going up and down the machines, with weight [work equipment]... Even if we don't know others [the professional history of older colleagues], we already know it from the impact we feel today”.

Although these workers are still considered young, there is the perception that the risk factors to which they are exposed are likely to potentiate early ageing, with the expectation that they will not be able to exert their activity until retirement age.

At a time when psychosocial risk factors and their impact on health at work have become subject to more debate, the reflection on the sustainability of career paths in painful conditions is crucial for the affirmation of the right to decent work. This is, therefore, also a pertinent moment to discuss the sustainability principles according to what the activity analysis reveals, so as to guarantee the preservation of decent working conditions for future generations of workers. In fact, being labelled “green”, does not mean that the safe and healthy working conditions are forms of de facto, that is to say, as if the “green” feature of this work exempted all occupational risks. In the case of Portugal, and taking into account the growth in the number of workers in the “green jobs”, the country faces a double challenge, as reinforced by Moreira et al. [24]. On the one side, to guarantee occupational health and safety (OHS) control measures for the existing and future generations of workers in green jobs, so as to promote healthy work environments; on the other side, OHS issues related to these green jobs should be inscribed as an “indispensable reference and indicator of sustainability” [24] (p. 205) and, consequently, an essential driver to sustainable development.

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