



WIN – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INdustrial regions | Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027

Connecting Competitiveness and Gender Equality in Danube Industrial Regions

WIN Policy Brief addressing EUSDR PA08 – Competitiveness of Enterprises

KEY MESSAGE

Women represent a significant, often highly skilled, part of the workforce across industrial regions in the Danube Region. However, their participation in employment is shaped by structural conditions in education systems, labour markets, care infrastructure, and persistent gender norms.

At the same time, women remain underrepresented in technical, scientific, and entrepreneurial fields, despite their strong potential contribution to regional innovation and growth. Addressing this requires not only skills development but also targeted support mechanisms, awareness-raising, and structured guidance systems.

Gender equality is not only a social objective but also a competitiveness issue: industrial regions facing demographic change and skills shortages cannot afford to underutilise women's talent, entrepreneurial potential, and leadership capacity.

These conditions are influenced across governance levels. While barriers are experienced locally and enabling frameworks are set nationally, EUSDR PA08 contributes to more gender-equal enterprise development across the Danube Region through transnational knowledge transfer, awareness-raising, and advocacy for gender-sensitive approaches to skills development, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness policies across the Danube Region.

1. WHY THIS MATTERS

The WIN project ("Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INdustrial regions") has addressed persistent gender gaps in employment across peripheral

industrial towns and regions in the Danube area. These regions are characterised by structural challenges, including limited labourmarket diversification, demographic pressure, skills shortages, and gender norms shaping education and career pathways.

Across the WIN pilot regions, gender gaps remain visible – particularly in STEM, R&D, an entrepreneurship – although in some cases, industrial regions perform at or above national averages, demonstrating the potential of well-adapted local systems.

Overall, four structural challenges stand out:

- Vocational and higher education programmes are not always sufficiently aligned with local labour market needs, particularly in regions facing skills shortages.
- Women remain underrepresented in STEM, technical occupations, leadership roles, and entrepreneurship pathways.
- Awareness of gender-specific barriers in education-to-employment transitions remains uneven across companies, institutions, and regions.
- Women face barriers to enter and re-enter labour markets, especially in regions with limited labour market diversification and care responsibilities.

While PA09 focuses primarily on skills and education systems, PA08 contributes by strengthening enterprise uptake, innovation ecosystems, entrepreneurship support, and labour market responsiveness. This includes advocating for gender-inclusive recruitment, promoting women's entrepreneurship and leadership, and signalling the skills required by competitive industrial enterprises.

2. WHAT WORKS

PA08 ACTION-ORIENTED PATHWAYS

PA08 – LINK TO ACTIONS: EDUCATION, TRAINING & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Aligning skills systems with labour market needs and gender equality goals

WIN shows that skills mismatches in industrial and peripheral regions stem from weak alignment between education, training systems, and regional economic structures. At the same time, gendered patterns in education pathways continue to limit women's participation in technical fields and innovation-driven sectors, as well as entrepreneurial activities. The aim is to strengthen responsive, inclusive, and future-oriented skills and talent ecosystems that support both competitiveness and gender equality.

Recommendations

- Increase women's participation in STEM, technical fields, and innovation-driven sectors on the company side and via adaptation of companies' training and recruitment initiatives
- Promote entrepreneurship education and business skills for women, especially through the PA08 workgroup 'female entrepreneurship'
- Strengthen cooperation between education providers, employers, and regional innovation actors, e.g., via coordinated cluster cooperation or regional innovation networks
- Encourage enterprises and regional support organisations to identify future skill needs and integrate gender-sensitive approaches into workforce development

PA08 – LINK TO ACTIONS: GOVERNANCE & INCLUSION SYSTEM MODERNISATION

Embedding gender equality into enterprise and competitiveness governance

WIN highlights that gender inequalities in labour market outcomes are rooted not only in education and training systems but also in workplace practices, institutional frameworks, and uneven awareness of structural barriers. The aim is to embed gender equality more systematically into enterprise governance, regional competitiveness policies, and institutional practices.

Recommendations

- Encourage enterprises to adopt inclusive recruitment, retention, progression, and flexible working practices that support women's labour market participation and career continuity
- Support institutional uptake of gender-sensitive approaches in curricula, strategies, regional innovation systems, and cluster initiatives, including visibility and outreach measures that increase women's participation in STEM, R&D, entrepreneurship, and innovation leadership
- Raise awareness about the needed flexible labour conditions for workers with childcare and elder-care responsibilities, supporting labour market entry and re-entry, e.g., in regional innovation networks
- Encourage collection and use of sex-disaggregated labour market, skills entrepreneurship, and participation data to inform regional competitiveness policies and monitor progress

PA08 – LINK TO ACTIONS: WOMEN'S NETWORKS, MENTORING & ENTREPRENEURSHIP SUPPORT

Strengthening guidance, coaching, and mentoring systems for women

WIN demonstrates that access to skills alone is not sufficient to ensure equal labour market outcomes. Women benefit significantly from structured support mechanisms that provide guidance, information, and networks, particularly in transition phases and non-linear career paths. The aim is to strengthen inclusive support systems that improve access to opportunities and networks and enable informed career choices, including entrepreneurship.

Recommendations

- Institutionalise coaching and mentoring systems supporting women's career pathways
- Strengthen gender-sensitive career guidance and transition support services
- Develop visible regional and transnational advisory and support networks for women
- Facilitate role model and peer-learning initiatives in technical and entrepreneurial fields

3. POLICY IMPLICATION

Strengthening inclusive and competitive labour markets and skills ecosystems in the Danube Region requires closer integration of skills development and labour market demand, education systems, and regional economic structures, as well as gender equality and innovation policies.

In this context, PA08 plays a key role in:

- Promoting gender-responsive enterprise support, entrepreneurship ecosystems, and inclusive workplace practices
- Connecting education systems with regional competitiveness and innovation ecosystems
- Supporting lifelong learning, guidance, and institutional capacity
- Strengthening evidence-based policymaking through better use of gender-sensitive monitoring and labour market intelligence
- Enabling transfer and upscaling of effective practices across the Danube Region

WIN findings indicate that regions that better connect enterprise needs, skills development, and gender equality are more resilient to demographic pressures, more innovative, and better positioned to sustain industrial competitiveness. Achieving this requires coordinated action across education, labour market, enterprise, and innovation policies, supported by cooperation at all governance levels and across EUSDR Priority Areas.

4. CONTACT

WIN contributes to policy development under the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), supporting evidence-based approaches to inclusive labour markets.

WIN Project – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INDUSTRIAL regions.
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<https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/win>

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5. WIN KNOWLEDGE & EVIDENCE BASE

This policy brief is based on findings and pilot activities from the WIN – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INdustrial regions Project.

Further evidence and tools include:

- [Project video](#)
- [Transnational research on gendered labour market barriers](#)
- [Case study-based research on local labour markets in WIN regions](#)
- [Pilot action documentation from seven industrial regions](#)
- [Good practice compendium on women's employment and social innovation across all 14 countries of the Danube Region](#)
- [Stakeholder interviews and policy analysis](#)
- [Policy recommendations for multi-level governance in the Danube Region](#)

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Note: This policy brief reflects findings and recommendations developed within the WIN project and is intended to support policy dialogue within the EUSDR. It does not constitute an official position or policy document of any EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators.

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