



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

Connecting Skills, Labour Market Access and Gender Equality in Danube Industrial Regions

WIN Policy Brief addressing EUSDR PA09 – People & Skills

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.

WIN findings highlight that gender inequalities are strongly linked to territorial labour market structures and insufficient alignment between skills systems and regional economic realities. At the same time, gender perspectives remain under-represented in spatial and regional policy approaches. Addressing these challenges requires stronger coordination between skills, labour market, regional development, and inclusion policies across the Danube Region.

These dynamics operate across governance levels: barriers are experienced locally, enabling frameworks are shaped nationally and at EU level, while EUSDR PA09 plays a key role in ensuring that skills systems, labour market policies, and inclusion measures are effectively connected, implemented, and transferred across nations.

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 industrial towns and peripheral industrial regions in the Danube area. These regions are characterised by structural challenges, including sectoral concentration, limited labour market diversification, and gender norms shaping education and career pathways.

Across the pilot regions in the WIN project, a diverse but structurally comparable picture emerges. Gender gaps remain visible – particularly in STEM, R&D, and entrepreneurship – although in some cases industrial regions perform at or above national averages, demonstrating the potential of well-adapted local systems.

WIN findings highlight that these challenges are shaped by both territorial labour market conditions and systemic policy gaps:

- Labour markets in industrial regions are often narrow and spatially constrained, limiting opportunities even for highly skilled women.
- Skills systems and training provision are not always sufficiently aligned with local labour market needs.
- Gender equality frameworks exist at the EU and national level, but uptake at the local level and cross-regional transfer remain limited.
- Women continue to face barriers to labour market entry and re-entry, particularly in regions with limited labour market diversification and care responsibilities.

In this context, EUSDR PA09 plays a key role in connecting education, skills, and labour market policies across countries and regions, enabling better alignment, knowledge transfer, and more inclusive labour market outcomes. PA09 contributes to these actions through coordination, policy learning, and the transfer of approaches across the Danube Region.

2. WHAT WORKS

PA09 ACTION-ORIENTED PATHWAYS

PA09 – LINK TO ACTIONS 3 & 4: INTEGRATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS & SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR ALL

Reframing vulnerability through a territorial and gender lens

WIN expands the understanding of vulnerability by showing that women – also highly skilled – face structural disadvantages in territorially constrained labour markets, particularly in industrial and Just Transition regions. The aim is to support more targeted and inclusive labour market integration policies.

Recommendations

- Recognise women in industrial regions as a context-specific vulnerable group in labour market policies
- Promote place-based labour market integration approaches reflecting regional economic structures
- Support targeted measures addressing structural barriers (e.g., re-entry, career stagnation, sectoral lock-in)
- Facilitate exchange of practices addressing gender-specific barriers across regions

LINK TO PA09 - ACTIONS 5 & 6:

EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS & KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND COMPETENCES

Aligning skills systems with territorial labour market needs and gender equality goals

WIN reveals that persistent labour shortages are often linked to misalignment between training systems and local labour market demand, combined with gendered access to skills. The aim is to improve skills matching and increase the participation of women in future-oriented sectors.

Recommendations

- Strengthen alignment between training, (higher) education, and regional labour market needs
- Promote women's participation in STEM, technical fields, and entrepreneurship
- Support flexible and lifelong learning systems adapted to different life situations

- Enhance cooperation between education providers, employers, and regional actors to provide women with integrated support combining skills development, business literacy, and other training support, particularly for vulnerable groups

LINK TO PA09 - ACTION 8:

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, EQUITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Integrating gender equality into territorial and spatial development policies

WIN demonstrates that gender-equal labour markets contribute directly to regional resilience, economic performance, and social cohesion. At the same time, gender perspectives remain underrepresented in spatial planning, regional development, and territorial policy frameworks. The aim is to support more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable regional development.

Recommendations

- Integrate gender equality into regional development and spatial planning frameworks
- Strengthen awareness of gendered labour market barriers among policymakers
- Promote cross-sectoral policy approaches linking labour, education, and regional development
- Support transfer and upscaling of effective local initiatives across the Danube Region

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, PA09 plays a key role in:

- Bridging territorial and sectoral policy silos
- Supporting policy learning and transfer across regions
- Enabling the upscaling of effective local solutions
- Strengthening coordination between skills systems, labour market policies, inclusion measures, and regional development frameworks

WIN findings indicate that regions that better connect enterprise needs, skills development, and gender equality are more resilient to demographic change, more innovative, and better positioned to sustain industrial competitiveness. Achieving this requires coordinated action across governance levels and relevant 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.
Flagship project of EUSDR PA09 2025

Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027

<https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/win>

Coordinator: Jani Kozina (ZRC SAZU);
jani.kozina@zrc-sazu.si

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](#)

Prepared by: Jörn Harfst, Mariia Rastvorova, and Simone Kocher (University of Graz) and Jani Kozina (ZRC SAZU), on behalf of the WIN Project consortium.

Funding: The WIN – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INdustrial regions Project is supported by the Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027 and co-funded by the European Union.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Union, the Interreg Danube Region Programme, EUSDR Priority Area.

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.

© 2026 University of Graz. Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.
Layout: Kocher, S.

Suggested citation: Harfst, J., Rastvorova, M., Kocher, S., & Kozina, J. (2026). *Connecting Skills, Labour Market Access and Gender Equality in Danube Industrial Regions*. Policy Brief addressing EUSDR PA09 – People & Skills. University of Graz, WIN Project, Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027.