

WIN

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

WIN Project

Improving the position of Women in the
Labour Markets of Peripheral Industrial Regions



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Focus of the Project	3
Part I: Conceptual Framework	5
Context and Objectives	5
Women in Peripheral Industrial Towns and Regions	7
Part II: Female Labour Market Challenges in Industrial Regions of the Danube Area	11
Structural Context of Labour Markets in Industrial Regions	11
Key Labour Market Barriers for Women	14
Part III: Pathways to Inclusive Labour Markets of Industrial Regions	17
Existing Policy Frameworks	17
Pathways to Action	18
Multi-Level Policy Recommendations	21
Conclusion.....	27
About the WIN Project.....	29
References.....	31

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Executive Summary

Female participation in the labour markets of industrial regions represents a significant development challenge across many parts of Europe. Despite its importance, the issue has received limited attention in academic research, resulting in a clear knowledge gap at both the scholarly and applied policy levels. In response, the WIN project (“Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INdustrial regions”) is the first comprehensive analysis of its kind, combining both academic rigour with practical pilot testing. The project has addressed the specific challenges women face in small and medium-sized industrial towns – settlements that are numerous in the Danube Region, and that play a vital socio-economic role in the wider Central and Eastern European area.

Women represent one of the most important demographic groups in such places. Their

labour market integration and mobility, contemporary lifestyles, and everyday needs pose persistent, yet often overlooked, challenges for urban and regional planners. This document identifies employment-related obstacles that are particularly pronounced in industrial regions. These include traditional family norms, a lack of female role models, rigid workplace cultures and working-time patterns, insufficient social and economic infrastructure (such as childcare provision), and a predominantly technical or manual orientation of local labour markets. Against this background, these recommendations seek to foster a shared understanding of women’s needs in relation to labour markets in industrial regions and the broader development challenges of these areas.

FOCUS

The Project has focused on women as a group that faces an increased risk of exclusion from the labour markets of industrial towns and peripheral industrial regions.

Many of these places are affected by negative reputations as so-called “left behind” or “places that don’t matter,” often being shaped by long-term socio-economic transformations (European Commission, 2024). To address these place-specific challenges, the WIN project leverages macro-regional policy frameworks and mechanisms, promoting people-centred and place-based strategies tailored to peripheral industrial contexts. It thereby closes the gap between predominantly ‘space-blind’ labour-market policies and ‘gender-blind’ regional-development perspectives. Building on these insights, the paper provides concrete and targeted policy recommendations for local and regional stakeholders, as well as for actors at national and European levels, particu-

larly the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR).

The recommendations emphasise the strategic role of social innovation in raising awareness of women’s opportunities, enabling critical reflection on structural and social barriers, and strengthening the collective capacity of women to act together.

Such collective action supports women in becoming agents of change in addressing gender inequalities. In this context, the paper highlights women’s resilience and innovative potential in regional development, underlining their important role both within and beyond the workplace. Finally, the novelty of this paper lies in its strategic guidance on how to mobilise these potentials to build and

sustain industrial communities with distinctive identities, thereby making industrial regions more attractive places for all people.

Key Messages from the WIN-Project

01

Women represent a key yet underutilised potential for regional development in many industrial regions of the Danube area.

02

Structural labour market conditions - such as sectoral specialisation, rigid working arrangements, and limited childcare provision - continue to restrict women’s participation.

03

Cultural norms and gendered career pathways reinforce occupational segregation and limit access to leadership and entrepreneurship.

04

Social innovation initiatives demonstrate that locally embedded solutions can effectively address these barriers.

05

Coordinated action across governance levels is essential to scale successful approaches and create inclusive industrial labour markets.

Part I: Conceptual Framework

CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

These policy recommendations represent one of the main outputs of the WIN project. Their purpose is to disseminate the project's key findings beyond the immediate project partnership and to highlight their relevance for stakeholders in other peripheral industrial regions. In particular, the document aims to provide targeted policy advice and knowledge to stakeholders in the Danube Region, especially within EUSDR Priority Areas 08 (Competitiveness of Enterprises), 09 (People & Skills) and 10 (Institutional Capacity and Cooperation).



The Geographical Institute of the University of Graz (PP3) and the Anton Melik Geographical Institute of the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts (PP1) have led the preparation of the document.

Contributes to a more coherent and coordinated approach to addressing women's employment in industrial regions.

These recommendations aim to encourage policymakers, employers, and employment-support organisations to adopt more inclusive policies and practices that reduce institutional barriers.

Such changes are intended to create enabling environments that support women's empowerment, address gender inequalities, and expand access to inclusive employment opportunities in peripheral industrial regions. The WIN project has examined women's labour market situations across seven pilot regions in Central and Eastern Europe ([D1.1.2](#)). This document is grounded in the project's research activities ([D1.1.1](#)) and practical pilot actions ([D2.3.4](#)), which supported locally embedded

solutions and generated tangible change in industrial communities – by women and for women. Through a bottom-up approach, the project has focused on local social innovations as practical solutions to make labour markets more accessible, inclusive, and effective for women ([D2.2.2](#)).

Key areas of action included women's networks, training and skills development, self-confidence building, entrepreneurial education, digital skills, and career guidance. Together, these measures equip women with the tools and opportunities needed to enhance their professional potential.

This document contributes to the sustainability of the WIN project by ensuring that its results remain accessible and applicable beyond the project's lifetime. All project partners contributed to the development of these recommendations.

WOMEN IN PERIPHERAL INDUSTRIAL TOWNS AND REGIONS

The WIN project focuses on women as a key demographic group in peripheral industrial towns and regions, where they face an increased risk of exclusion from local labour markets. Many of these towns and regions are commonly perceived as “left-behind” or as “places that don’t matter,” reflecting long-term industrial restructuring, economic decline, and persistent out-migration.

In this context, the WIN project leverages macro-regional policy frameworks to address the specific conditions of peripheral industrial regions in the Danube Region through people-centred and place-based strategies. Building on existing research, the WIN project has sought to clarify the challenges women face in peripheral industrial towns and regions across the Danube area. Literature frequently assumes that increased female labour market participation contributes to economic competitiveness and gross domestic product (GDP) growth (International

Labour Organisation, 2024). In peripheral and rural regions in particular, women – and female innovators – are often seen as key contributors to balanced social, economic, and environmental development, thereby supporting long-term regional vitality (European Parliament, 2019).

Despite this recognised potential, women in peripheral industrial towns and regions encounter a range of persistent barriers to labour market participation. In many industrial regions across Central and Eastern Europe, women’s unemployment rates remain high, while part-time employment is widespread. These patterns are reinforced by narrow, highly specialised local



National policy responses often struggle to address challenges in a place- and gender-sensitive way. Instead, they tend to rely on spatially blind labour-market policies and gender-blind regional development instruments, such as European cohesion policy measures.

**Empowering women,
WINning together!**

labour markets, workplace cultures shaped by traditional, often masculine norms, and rigid working-time arrangements. In addition, insufficient social and economic infrastructure – most notably the lack of accessible and affordable childcare facilities – further constrains women's opportunities to participate fully in the labour market.

At the same time, improving women's position in industrial labour markets requires a broader perspective that goes beyond employment participation and workplace conditions alone.



Gender inequalities in peripheral industrial regions (and beyond) are deeply embedded in wider social, cultural, and institutional structures. Addressing them requires empowering strategies that also strengthen women's participation in political processes, social networks, and community life. However, existing research and strategic policy documents often place disproportionate emphasis on economic outcomes and the assumed link between economic development and female empowerment.

While economic participation contributes to empowerment, EU strategies have primarily focused on labour market indicators such as employment and pay gaps, potentially underplaying other important dimensions of women's agency and decision-making (Duflo, 2012; European Commission, 2020).

In addition to structural and social barriers, women's participation in labour markets is shaped by the broader policy environment. Across the Danube Region, European and national strategies address gender equality, digital skills, and entrepreneurship, providing an important framework for action. However, these measures often do not fully reflect the specific conditions of peripheral industrial regions, where local labour markets, institutional capacities, and cultural norms require tailor-made approaches. This context underscores the need for targeted, place-based strategies that complement existing policy instruments and inform the recommendations presented in this report.

In line with this understanding, the WIN project adopts a comprehensive concept of empowerment that extends beyond access to employment and economic resources. It emphasises social innovation to strengthen regional awareness of women's capacities, challenge structural barriers, and support collective action. Such processes enable women to act as agents of change against inequality and to contribute actively to inclusive and resilient development in industrial regions - both within and beyond the workplace.

"[Empowerment is] ...a process that engages women in thinking differently – about themselves, about the situations they are in, about their social worlds, relationships and horizons." (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356)

Part II: Female Labour Market CHALLENGES in industrial regions of the Danube area

Structural Context of Labour Markets in Industrial Regions

The Danube Region is widely recognised as a highly diverse macro-region in terms of economic performance. At the same time, gender inequalities in labour market participation remain a shared territorial challenge.

Statistical evidence shows that across all countries of the region, women's employment rates are consistently lower than those of men (Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted these inequalities, particularly through the sudden increase in women's unpaid care and domestic work.

Peripheral industrial regions represent a particularly challenging environment for women's labour market participation. Their economic structures are strongly shaped by long-standing industrial specialisation, with employment concentrated in sectors such as mining, manufacturing, and technology-related industries. These sectors have historically been male-dominated and continue to influence occupational structures and workplace cultures. As a result, local labour markets tend to remain narrow and gender-

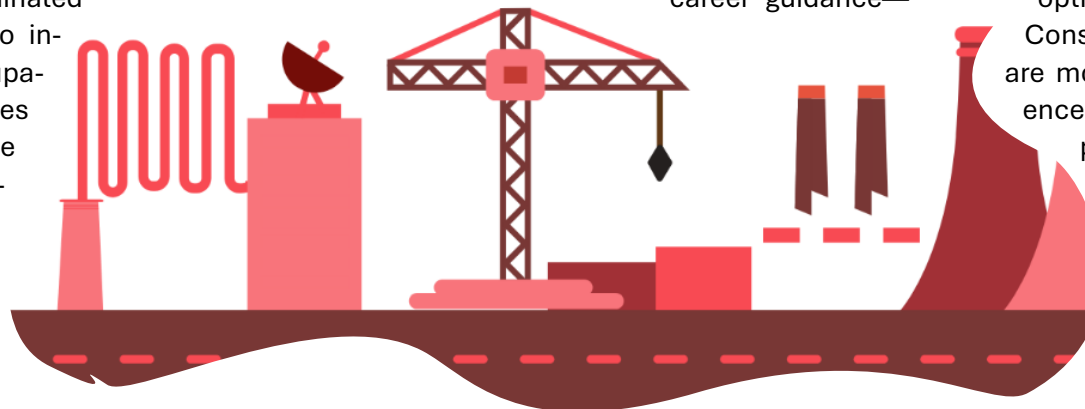
segregated, with men more frequently occupying high-skilled technical positions while women are often concentrated in lower-skilled or service-related roles. While women's industrial employment was more widespread in some countries during the socialist period ('women's factories'), even these patterns often only reinforced gendered divisions of labour.

As industrial production has undergone outsourcing, restructuring, or technological upgrading, women have been disproportionately affected by job losses. At the same time, labour market institutions—including education, training programmes, and career guidance—

have often continued to reflect traditional models of industrial employment that implicitly favour male career pathways. In some cases, the limited consideration of women's needs in labour market design has contributed to the persistence of male-dominated workforces (EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 2019).

The structural conditions outlined above pose significant barriers to women seeking employment, particularly in the industrial and technological sectors. Limited availability of jobs in non-technological sectors, underdeveloped service economics, and scarce alternative career paths constrain women's options.

Consequently, women are more likely to experience precarious employment or limited career prospects. Many are also compelled to commute to larger urban centres or



migrate in search of better opportunities, contributing to demographic decline and brain drain in peripheral regions (Kröhnert & Vollmer, 2012; European Parliament, 2025).

Beyond labour market outcomes, these dynamics have wider implications for regional development. Women's economic participation is closely linked to empowerment, well-being, and household decision-making power. When access to employment is restricted, women's opportunities for economic independence and social participation are reduced.

At the regional level, the underutilisation of women's skills represents a loss of human capital, limiting economic diversification, innovation potential, and long-term development prospects.

These structural constraints translate into a set of persistent and interrelated labour market barriers for women in industrial regions of the Danube area, which are further detailed below. Building on this diagnostic, Part III shifts the focus from challenges to action by identifying existing policy gaps and outlining practical pathways for more inclusive and gender-responsive labour markets.

Comparative research across the seven WIN pilot regions confirms that these challenges are systemic in peripheral industrial areas of the Danube Region (D1.1.2). Analysis highlights several recurring barriers affecting women's labour market participation (D1.1.1).

Key Labour Market Barriers for Women

Overview of the main structural, economic and socio-cultural barriers affecting women's participation in labour markets.

1



Underrepresentation in Industrial Sectors and STEM

Women remain significantly underrepresented in male-dominated sectors such as mining, manufacturing and technology, reinforced by lower participation in STEM education and restricted access to research and development pathways.

2



Gender Pay Gaps and Precarious Employment

Gender pay gaps persist, while women are more often concentrated in low-paid, part-time, informal or insecure jobs with limited career progression.

3



Barriers to Leadership and Entrepreneurship

Institutional and cultural barriers continue to restrict women's access to leadership roles, finance, mentorship and professional networks.

4



Inadequate Support Structures

Limited childcare, inflexible working arrangements and weak mobility infrastructure constrain women's labour market participation.

5



Persistent Cultural Norms and Institutional Gaps

Traditional gender roles remain deeply embedded, while equality mechanisms are often weak, poorly implemented or inattentive to intersecting inequalities.

6



Accessibility and Spatial Remoteness

Peripheral and rural locations can limit access to jobs, services and training opportunities, especially where connectivity and transport are insufficient.

Source: Illustration based on author's content, created with support of ChatGPT, July 2026.

Women's
empowerment can be
understood as the
process through
which women acquire
the ability to make
strategic life choices.
(Kabeer, 1999)

Part III: Pathways to inclusive Labour markets of industrial regions

Existing Policy Frameworks

Having identified key labour market challenges in industrial regions, as in the section above, the WIN Project has also analysed how these gaps are addressed by policies (D1.3.1). Research shows that European and national policies provide a broad framework for gender equality, digital skills, and entrepreneurship. However, their implementation at regional and local levels – especially in peripheral industrial regions – often remains uneven. Here, insufficient coordination across governance levels, gender-blind regional development initiatives, and space-blind labour market instruments all hamper integrated and effective local policy implementation. Overall, persistent struc-

tural, cultural, and institutional barriers limit the impact of existing policies, as local labour markets, institutional capacities, and cultural norms require place- and gender-based approaches.

Despite these shortcomings, insights from WIN pilot regions, stakeholder consultations, and existing initiatives outside the WIN context all highlight that concrete pathways to change exist: Networking, awareness-raising, and role models are widely regarded as essential for promoting women's labour market participation, while inclusive approaches engaging both women and men are preferred to avoid reinforcing gender divisions. These

observations provide the foundation for the actionable pathways and multi-level policy recommendations presented in this part.

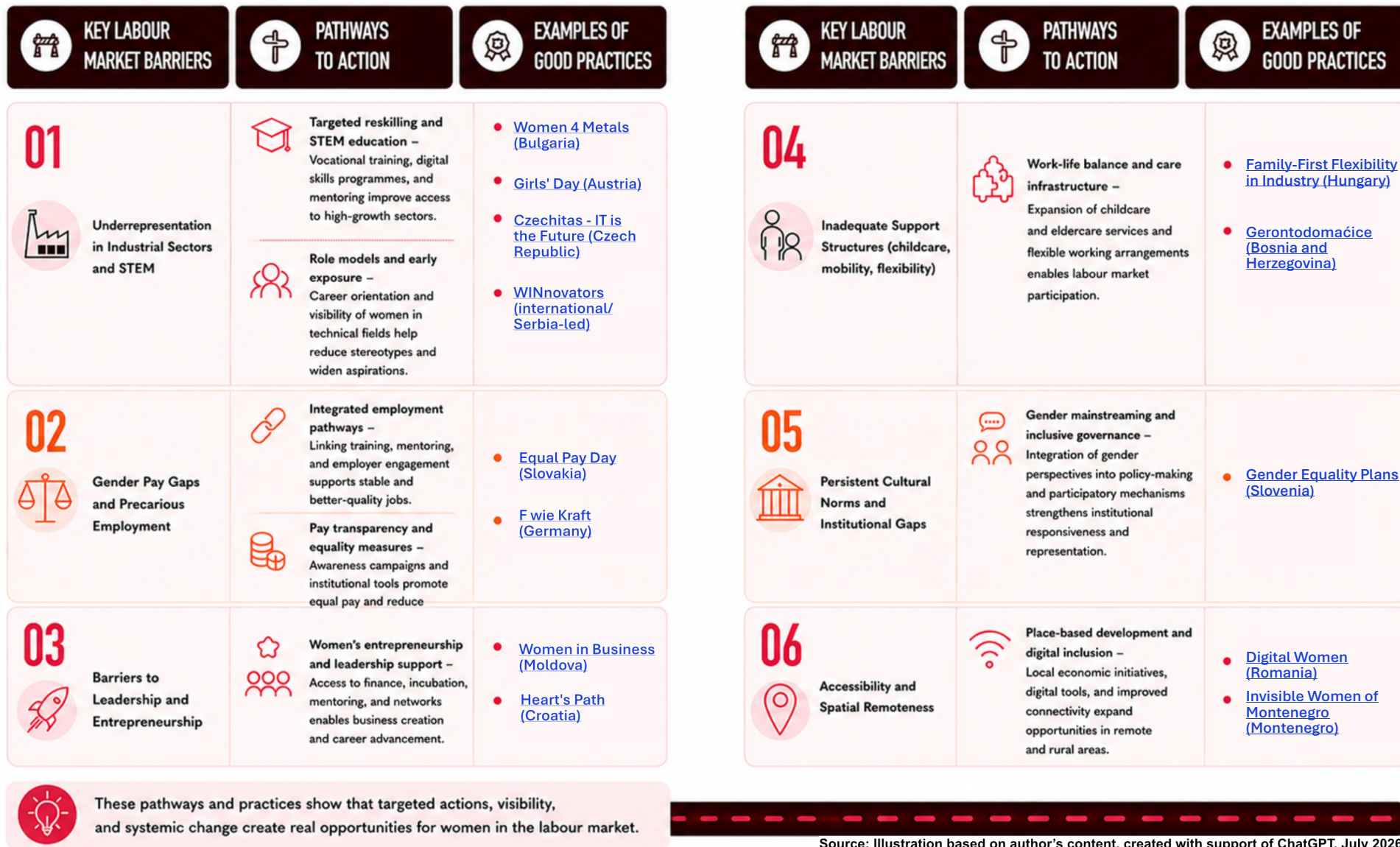


Pathways to Action

To address the key challenges from Part II and the policy gaps from above into practices for change, this section presents concrete pathways that combine social innovation and policy measures, also practically tested in the WIN context. The Figure on the next pages illustrates how each pathway responds to the key labour market barriers identified in the WIN project. This barrier–response logic highlights the strategic rele-

vance of the recommended actions and demonstrates their practical applicability through examples from the [WIN Catalogue of Good Practices](#). By connecting challenges, solutions, and real-world initiatives, the figure supports policymakers and stakeholders in translating analysis into targeted and operational measures.

KEY LABOUR MARKET BARRIERS AND PATHWAYS TO ACTION



Source: Illustration based on author's content, created with support of ChatGPT, July 2026.

Multi-Level Policy Recommendations

Building on the pathways, the multi-level recommendations translate social innovation and policy measures into actionable steps for different stakeholders at European, national, regional, and local levels.

They are designed to ensure that interventions are coordinated, context-sensitive, and capable of addressing the structural barriers identified in Part II. By aligning actions across governance levels, these recommendations aim to create sustainable pathways for women's employment, empowerment, and participation in industrial regions.

The following multi-level recommendations operationalise the social innovation and policy pathways outlined above, ensuring that interventions address structural barriers while reflecting local realities, thereby creating sustainable, gender-inclusive industrial labour markets.

These recommendations are sustained by practice-oriented policy briefs for local and regional, as well as national stakeholders and the relevant EUSDR Priority Areas 08 (Competitiveness of Enterprises), 09 (People & Skills), and 10 (Institutional Capacity and Cooperation).



European / Macro-Regional Level

- 1 Mainstream Gender Equality**
in industrial and regional development policies, including EUSDR Priority Areas 08-10.
- 2 Fund and support Pilot Projects**
that adapt EU objectives concerning gender equality to local conditions, particularly in peripheral industrial regions (e.g., STEM initiatives for women).
- 3 Promote knowledge exchange and visibility of good practices,**
including social innovation initiatives, reskilling programs, and care-based employment models.
- 4 Enhance institutional capacity**
by providing training and guidance to regional authorities and social partners on gender-sensitive labour market policy.

National / State Level

- 1 Align industrial, labour, and gender equality policies**
to ensure integrated approaches across ministries.
- 2 Foster multi-level governance approaches**
by communicating national strategies effectively to regional actors and upstreaming successful local initiatives nationally.
- 3 Invest in social infrastructure**
such as childcare, eldercare, and transport services, especially in peripheral areas, to remove structural barriers.
- 4 Support targeted reskilling and lifelong learning**
particularly in digital, STEM, and high-growth sectors, such as emerging green industries.
- 5 Enable women's entrepreneurship and leadership**
through access to finance, mentoring, and incubation programs.
- 6 Strengthen policy awareness and mentoring**
ensuring clear responsibilities, and establishing gender-disaggregated indicators to track outcomes comprehensively.

Regional / Local Level

- 1 Foster local ecosystems and partnerships**
based on local labour market analysis and stakeholder engagement.
- 2 Develop place-based gender strategies**
between employers, education providers, civil society, and women's organisations.
- 3 Invest in soft factors and social innovation**
including networking, mentoring, role models, and awareness campaigns.
- 4 Pilot and scale innovative solutions,**
such as flexible work models, community-based care services, and integrated employment pathways.
- Strengthen accessibility and infrastructure,**
including transport, digital connectivity, and social services, to ensure women can access employment and training.
- 6 Promote self-employment in creative industries**
including crafts, digital marketing, and tourism, as a relevant and socially appreciated professional activity, to provide more opportunities for women's income.

Summary Table: Multi-Level

Level	Dimension / Focus	Objective
 EU / Macro-Regional	Policy & Governance	Embed gender equality in industrial and regional strategies
	Knowledge & Learning	Promote transnational exchange and visibility of good practices
 National / State	Economic Participation & Skills	Enable access to quality employment and emerging sectors
	Social Infrastructure	Reduce structural barriers to participation.
 Regional / Local	Social Empowerment	Strengthen agency and challenge gender norms
	Local Labour Market Integration	Facilitate access to jobs and skills.
	Coordination & Ecosystems	Build sustainable local support systems.

Policy Recommendations

Key Actions	Examples
Mainstream gender in EUSDR PA08-10; support gender-responsive regional planning; fund pilot actions; provide methodological guidance	EU toolkits on "Considering gender in regional transformations"; Gender Equality Plans (Slovenia)
Support networks, peer-learning platforms, and dissemination of social innovation and skills programmes	WIN Catalogue of Good Practices
Targeted reskilling, STEM education, lifelong learning, and support for women's entrepreneurship and leadership	STEM training initiatives; National action plans
Invest in childcare and eldercare, improve transport connectivity, and promote flexible working arrangements.	National care and mobility strategies
Mentoring programmes, role models, awareness campaigns, and women's networks	Girls' Day; WINnovators
Align training with local demand; support SMEs in inclusive recruitment; integrate employment pathways.	Digital Women; Gerontodomačice
Foster partnerships among employers, education providers, civil society, and women's organisations	Local WIN Pilot initiatives

Source: Illustration based on author's content, created with support of ChatGPT, July 2026.

Conclusion

Towards Inclusive Industrial Towns and Regions

Industrial regions across the Danube area are undergoing profound economic and social transformation. Ensuring that women can participate fully in these changes is first and foremost a matter of equality, but also a prerequisite for sustainable regional development. As demographic pressures intensify and labour shortages increase, the potential contribution of women to industrial labour markets becomes ever more important.

The findings of the WIN project demonstrate that the barriers women face in peripheral industrial regions are not merely individual challenges, but structural issues embedded in local labour markets, social norms, and institutional frameworks. Addressing them, therefore, requires long-term, co-ordinated action across governance levels and policy domains—from education and labour market policy to regional development and social infrastructure.

At the same time, the experiences of the WIN pilot regions illustrate that change is possible. Local initiatives, social innovation, and collaborative networks can create new opportunities for women while strengthening the resilience and attractiveness of industrial communities. Unlocking these potentials requires continued commitment from European, national, regional, and local actors. By embedding gender-sensitive approaches into in-

dustrial and regional development strategies, investing in supportive infrastructures and skills development, and strengthening local networks and role models, stakeholders can help create industrial regions where women are not only participants in labour markets but active drivers of innovation and community development.

Supporting women's empowerment in peripheral industrial towns and regions ultimately contributes to a more inclusive, resilient, and future-oriented region - a place where people can build careers, families, and communities in the long term.



About the WIN Project

WIN – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial Regions, is a transnational project funded by the Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027. The project addresses the challenges women face in the labour markets of peripheral industrial towns and regions across the Danube area, where economic restructuring, limited labour market diversification, and traditional industrial structures often restrict women’s employment opportunities.

The project brings together 10 partners from seven countries to strengthen women’s participation in regional labour markets and promote more inclusive economic development. Through research, pilot actions in seven industrial regions, and stakeholder cooperation, WIN develops and tests social innovation approaches that support women’s employment, skills development, entrepreneurship, and professional networks. The project also contributes to policy dialogue within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR).

Project Partners

Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SI); University of Graz (AT); VESTE – Association Styrian Iron Road (AT); LAG Sokolovsko (CZ); Central Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency (HU); Ministry of Economy Affairs of Herceg-Bosnian Canton (BA); Employment Office of Herceg-Bosnian Canton (BA); Association of Business Women in Serbia (RS); National Management School of Bulgaria (BG); Association for Culture and Education PiNA (SI).



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WIN Project - Policy Recommendations

WIN Project

Women in Peripheral Industrial Regions

Learn more about the WIN Project

www.interreg-danube.eu/projects/win

