Interreg Danube Region

Co-funded by the European Union

WIN

Personal stories of women in the labour market of peripheral industrial regions

WIN

Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INdustrial regions

This project is supported by the Interreg Danube Region Programme project co-funded by the European Union

Interreg Danube Region

Co-funded by the European Union

WIN

DELIVERABLE INFORMATION	
Project acronym:	**WIN**
Project title:	**Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral INdustrial regions**
Priority:	**3: A more social Danube Region**
Program specific objective	**3.1 Accessible, inclusive and effective labour markets**
URL of project website:	**https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/win**
Deliverable number:	**D 2.4.1**
Tittle of deliverable:	**Personal stories of women in the labour market of peripheral industrial regions**
Specific objective:	**SO2 Implementing social innovations for better labour markets for women in peripheral industrial regions**
Activity:	**2.4 Personal stories of women in the labour market of peripheral industrial regions**
Partners in charge (authors):	**PiNA**
Partners involved:	**ZRC SAZU, UniGRAZ, MASS, CTRIA, MGK10, ZZUP HBZ, ABW, NMS, VESTE**
Status:	**Final version**
Date:	**30.5.2026**

This project is supported by the Interreg Danube Region Programme project co-funded by the European Union

Table of Content

INTRODUCTION TO THE WIN PERSONAL STORIES 5
Methodological Approach 6
Voices of women across the Danube Region 8
Slovenia 8
STORY 1: Coal as gold 9
STORY 2: From physics to board games 13
STORY 3: When a love of Coffee becomes a business 17
STORY 4: Lace at the starting line 22
Austria **26**
STORY 1: Following her gut feeling to the forefront of research 26
STORY 2: A woman, her path and her place at Erzberg 29
STORY 3: A versatile and successful technician 31
Czech Republic **33**
STORY 1: From Teacher to Hospital Director: The Inspiring Story of Jitka Bureš Samáková 34
STORY 2: The Only Woman Among 68 Directors: The Inspiring Story of Klara Sokolova from O-I Glassworks 37
STORY 3: From Restaurant to Innovative Meal Box Programs: The Story of Lucie Jejkalová, Who Wasn't Afraid to Start Over 41
Hungary **47**
STORY 1: The journey of a female leader in a male-dominated world 47
STORY 2: A life in service of the community 50
STORY 3: Balance, adaptation and working for the community 54
Bosnia and Herzegovina **57**
STORY 1: My main motivation comes from people's feedback 58
STORY 2: It all started with my idea for tourism 59
STORY 3: My motivation comes from meeting people in the community 61
Serbia **63**
STORY 1: Bridging cultures through tourism 64

STORY 2: Building resilience through entrepreneurship 66
STORY 3: Turning vision into reality through tourism 69
STORY 4: Creating a living story through rural tourism 72
STORY 5: Blending art and entrepreneurship through textile design 74
STORY 6: Resilience and entrepreneurship through hard work 77
STORY 7: Continuing tradition through modern entrepreneurship 79
Bulgaria **82**
STORY 1: Shaping a slower life with clay and intention 82
STORY 2: Creating space for dreams and connection 85
STORY 3: Creating without waiting 89
Reflections and Key messages 93
About the WIN project **96**
Conclusion **97**

INTRODUCTION TO THE WIN PERSONAL STORIES

In many peripheral industrial regions across the Danube Region, women's lives and career paths are shaped by factors that often remain invisible in statistics. These regions, historically built around heavy industry and traditionally male-dominated sectors, still reflect deeply rooted structures that influence who has access to opportunities, whose work is valued, and whose ambitions are supported.

For many women, entering or progressing in the labour market is not just a question of skills or motivation. It often involves navigating limited job opportunities, balancing paid work with a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities, and confronting persistent stereotypes about what women "should" or "should not" do. In some cases, women are expected to choose stability over ambition, or to adapt their aspirations to what is considered acceptable within their communities.

These challenges are not always visible, but they are deeply felt. They shape decisions about education, career paths, entrepreneurship, and everyday life. They influence whether women stay in their regions or leave, whether they pursue opportunities or hold back, and whether they feel seen, supported, or constrained.

This collection of personal stories aims to bring these realities closer to the reader. Instead of presenting abstract data or general conclusions, it offers a space for individual voices. Each story reflects a lived experience – shaped by local context, personal circumstances, and broader social dynamics.

This compilation brings together stories from seven pilot regions across the Danube Region. Each story reflects a unique perspective, yet together they form a broader narrative about resilience, ambition, and the realities of women navigating labour markets in peripheral industrial regions.

Some stories speak of persistence and achievement, while others reveal uncertainty, barriers, and difficult choices. Together, they form a more complete and honest picture of what it means to live and work as a woman in a peripheral industrial region today.

Through these personal stories, the intention is to give voice to women from different backgrounds and life situations, to highlight the realities of their everyday experiences in the labour market, and to make visible the challenges that often remain unseen. By bringing these narratives closer to the reader, the stories aim to foster understanding, challenge existing stereotypes, and encourage reflection on how more inclusive and supportive environments can be created.

By sharing these stories, the aim is not only to inform, but to create understanding. To move beyond stereotypes. To recognise both the visible and invisible challenges women face. And to open space for reflection, dialogue, and change.

Methodological Approach

The stories presented in this collection are based on personal conversations with women from different regions, backgrounds, and life situations. Rather than focusing on a single profile or definition of success, the intention was to capture a diversity of experiences – from women who

are building careers and businesses to those navigating uncertainty, transition, or limited opportunities.

Each story was developed through an interview process that encouraged open and honest reflection. Women were invited to share their life paths, motivations, challenges, and turning points, as well as their perspectives on work, community, and the future. The conversations were guided, but not strictly structured, allowing space for individual voices, emotions, and personal narratives to emerge naturally.

The focus was not only on achievements, but also on the obstacles and realities that often remain unspoken. This includes experiences related to balancing work and family life, overcoming institutional or societal barriers, dealing with self-doubt, or adapting to limited opportunities within local labour markets.

The stories were then shaped into narrative texts that combine context with personal voice. Rather than presenting a question-and-answer format, they aim to read as short portraits, where individual experiences are brought to life through storytelling and selected quotes.

Special attention was given to ensuring that the stories remain authentic and respectful, reflecting each woman's perspective without simplifying or generalising her experience. At the same time, they are written in a way that allows readers to connect, recognise shared challenges, and better understand the broader context in which these experiences take place.

Together, these stories do not aim to represent all women, but to offer a window into different realities – highlighting both diversity and common threads across regions.

Voices of women across the Danube Region

Here we bring together individual stories of women from different pilot regions. Each story stands on its own, reflecting a personal experience, background, and perspective.

Rather than following a single narrative, the stories present a variety of life situations and paths. Some focus on career development or entrepreneurship, while others highlight transitions, uncertainties, or everyday realities of combining work and personal responsibilities.

The stories are written as short narrative portraits, combining context with personal voice and selected quotes. They are not structured as interviews, but as reflections shaped through conversation.

Reading them side by side allows for comparison, but also highlights differences between regions, opportunities, and individual circumstances. Together, they form a diverse collection of perspectives rather than a single, unified narrative.

Slovenia

The following stories present the experiences of women living and working in the pilot region of Trbovlje, an area shaped by its industrial past and ongoing economic transformation.

Through their personal narratives, these stories reflect the realities of navigating work, entrepreneurship, and everyday life in a region where opportunities are evolving, yet still influenced by structural and social constraints. They offer insight into different life paths,

This project is supported by the Interreg Danube Region Programme project co-funded by the European Union

highlighting both the challenges women face and the ways in which they respond to them within their local environment.

(Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), PiNA)

STORY 1: Coal as gold

Marjeta Hribar

She is wearing five bracelets. *"Most people tell me it's too many,"* smiles Marjeta Hribar, *"but because they're black, they somehow merge into a whole."* The bracelets are made of coal – a material she knew as a child growing up in a mining colony in the Zasavje region, and the material from which she now creates unique jewelry sold as far away as Hollywood.

Rooted in coal

Marjeta comes from Zasavje, a region whose identity has been woven from coal for centuries. As a little girl, she played with coal – it was part of daily life, shaping both the landscape and the local identity. Marjeta only realized the significance of this background later, when searching for her design inspiration. "*Every designer should start from what they know best,"* she says. *"When I asked myself that question, the answer was clear."*

Coal is a material with a strong character, and Marjeta lets it tell its own story – she does not force it, she listens. Because each piece is shaped entirely by hand, without machines or molds, the result is unmistakably unique: no shape is repeated, no two creations are alike. *"Sometimes someone says to me: 'I'd like one exactly like that.'"* She smiles. *"That won't be possible."*

From local to global

Her journey was never intended as a direct path. Marjeta started with smaller projects, initially making crowns for Slovenian events. However, as interest in her coal jewelry spread from the region to national and then international audiences, art critics began to notice. They described her as a remarkable phenomenon: a designer who had crafted a distinctive style from an unconventional material. This story led to her invitation to present at an international symposium of art critics.

From the symposium, events took an unexpected turn. Someone from New York reached out via her website – which, at the time, was just three months old and largely unoptimized – expressing interest in collaborating to bring her narrative to a wider audience. *"I checked three times whether it was even credible,"* she laughs. *"A colleague and I went through everything they had sent me. And it still seemed impossible."*

The Oscars and gift bags

This seemingly impossible opportunity became reality. Marjeta's jewelry began appearing in the gift bags for Oscar nominees – not just once, but recurrently. Each year since, she has created pieces for prestigious Hollywood events, including the Miss California pageant. *"I never really highlighted this in the Slovenian public,"* she admits, *"but every year, something of mine is there."*

Behind that first order lies a tense story. At the time the order was placed, Marjeta had to send 100 bracelets to the United States within two days, scheduled to arrive directly at the hotel hosting the event. At that very moment, an embargo on coal had just been introduced. *"I knew nothing could get held up at customs. One wrong step and the entire project would have been buried."* But it worked, and the collaboration continues to this day.

What does it mean for marketing when Hollywood stars wear your jewelry? Marjeta is honest: *"I received an enormous number of responses. But I'm not allowed to reveal most of them – I don't have permission from their side. The Hollywood marketing machine is strictly defined and, above all, paid for."* She is nonetheless convinced that these doors lead forward – slowly, thoughtfully, in the long term.

Coal from the people, for the people

Although a rise in prestige could have led to higher prices, Marjeta consciously chose otherwise. *"Coal was always the material of heroes and at the same time of poor people,"* she explains. *"Its journey, which it now makes in the form of jewelry, must remain accessible to those who don't have full wallets."*

In line with this philosophy, she developed several lines: an accessible line for everyone, a higher-priced line, and an exclusive line for clients seeking truly exceptional pieces. *"Coal belonged to the people and was for the people. And it will stay that way."*

She sources her materials through diverse means. Originally, the coal came from the Zasavje mines. Today, people contact her when they uncover coal during renovations or when they find a piece in the forest. *"This is my treasury,"* she says, *"and as long as it exists, I will have material."*

Burnout and transformation

However, entrepreneurship brought its own challenges. Marjeta acknowledges that exhaustion crept in – not from creative work but from brand management, accounting, communication, and logistics. *"I realized I needed to reorganize. That I had to keep what fills me for myself, and hand everything else over to others."*

Today, she has a team of people around her who take on administrative and organizational tasks so she can focus on what she knows and loves: design, working with coal, and interacting with clients. *"That is the luxury you gain with experience,"* she says. *"When you know what drains you and what fills you, you can organize yourself accordingly."*

She also draws energy from stepping away – holidays, travel, breaks from routine. *"As an artist, I have to do this. It's not rest – it's a departure from established patterns. When I look at my work from a distance, I find new elements in it again."*

Advice for those who dream of going global

For those who dream of taking a local idea to the global market, Marjeta has a clear answer: *"The world is small. If your idea is good enough and original enough, someone, somewhere, will*

understand it." She is convinced that the path depends on persistence and on not paying attention to those who don't understand. *"Sometimes it seems like no one understands. But that is just a signal that you are on the right path."*

And on the question of whether, as a woman in the world of design and entrepreneurship, she feels in a subordinate position? Marjeta considers this. *"Male designers feel close to me – they have a strong style, just like my coal. I don't feel that I'm in competition with them. I would rather we joined forces and made better things together than any of us can manage alone."* A brief pause: *"There are no barriers. But there are some very creative solutions along the way."*

And that path – she says – just keeps getting more beautiful and smooth.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 2: From physics to board games

Nika Mlinarič Hribar

Friday is reserved for Nika Mlinarič Hribar's company. Monday through Thursday, she works as a physicist, and Friday is intended for games. In reality, she and her partner work for the company in the evenings, weekends, and on rainy days. *"We work in a campaign-driven way,"* Nika says, smiling.

A pandemic rethink

Nika is a physicist by both profession and nature. For years, she couldn't imagine another career – her work provided technical challenges and satisfaction. The pandemic changed her perspective. *"I realised a job is fragile. One disruption and it's gone."* This made her consider what would broaden her skills and increase her resilience.

The answer Nika was seeking came spontaneously – during walks in the hills with her life and business partner Blaž Hribar. Their shared conversations and evenings watching films gradually sparked an idea: a board game. Since she had been following the Kickstarter platform for a long time, especially drawn to the board game category, one of the most funded on the platform, the next step felt natural. *"A board game has no technological tail. Once you've sent it to your customers, the story is finished if you want it to be. I liked that."*

Huskies and the sledge team

The first game Nika and Blaž developed had players take on the role of sled dog racers. Each player assembles a team of husky dogs – each with its own character, and some that do not get along – and must guide the team across the race track. *"I recommend you try it,"* Nika says with a smile.

The Kickstarter campaign raised over 100,000 euros and attracted about 3,500 backers – making it the sixth-most-supported Slovenian project on the platform. *"Money alone isn't a fair comparison between projects, as product values differ. But 3,500 people trusting your idea—that means a lot."*

Buyers come from the USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, the UK, France, Italy, Sweden, and Slovenia.

Grandma's recipes and a new campaign

After the success of the first game, Nika and Blaž developed a second: **Grandma's recipes.** The story revolves around the best baker in the village retiring and passing on her recipe book, not all at once but piece by piece, to different relatives. Players work to piece together the secret

from scattered information. *"It's more demanding than the first one, but it received a very warm response,"* Nika shares.

A third game is already in development, though Nika has not yet announced a projected release date. She has not fully revealed the theme, but hints that it will connect to something old and cult-like. *"Follow me on LinkedIn – I share updates there as things develop,"* she adds.

Physics as a tool for everything

What sets Nika apart from many entrepreneurs is the systematic way of thinking developed through years of physics. *"Physics gives you a particular way of solving problems. When jumping into a new field, that system is very useful: it helps in recognising patterns and asking the right questions,"* Nika says. This approach served her in developing games, marketing, and running the Kickstarter campaign. She found soft skills – communication, sales, and presenting – required more effort. *"I realised this is not my natural talent. But I learned that sometimes you have to step outside your comfort zone,"* she reflects.

Community as part of success

For Nika, success is not measured solely by financial independence. It also means doing what makes her happy and being part of a community. Upon realising that the board game development scene in Slovenia was almost non-existent, she and Blaž decided to help create it by organising an annual event for anyone interested in game development. *"I think it's important to give something back to the community that supports you,"* Nika notes.

Zasavje as a starting point

Nika lives and works in Zasavje and views the region with affection but without idealism. *"A lot is improving here – many successful companies, excellent climbing infrastructure, some of the best climbing areas in Slovenia,"* she observes. Yet, one thing bothers her: *"I really hope that Zasavje will get a motorway connection. That is the one thing that is missing,"* Nika says.

What drives her forward

When asked what motivates her most in life and what frustrates her most, Nika responds without hesitation: *"Inefficiency really bothers me. Wasting time, wasting resources. I am wired to always look for ways to optimise things."*

Perhaps this is exactly why Nika, who could have stayed in a safe job, dedicates Fridays to board games, weekends to organising running events, and evenings to developing the next Kickstarter campaign. Not because she has to, but because she recognises where her resources lie and how best to use them.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 3: When a love of Coffee becomes a business

Valentina Gazvoda

Valentina Gazvoda knows exactly what she wants – a good cup of coffee. Not the kind from supermarket chains or vending machines, but genuine specialty coffee. This coffee grows at high altitudes, between 1,000 and 3,000 metres. It is hand-picked and carefully processed, meant for those who seek more than just caffeine. The journey from coffee lover to

entrepreneur was not simple for Valentina. Instead, it was a blend of coincidence, courage, and trust in her own judgement.

Speciality Coffee: The Best of the Best

Before understanding Valentina's story, it is important to understand what specialty coffee is. Specialty coffee accounts for just ten per cent of global production – the very pinnacle of the coffee world. It thrives at high altitudes in unique microclimates that machines cannot reach, making hand-harvesting necessary. Only fully ripe, red cherries are selected, and each step of processing—from fermentation to drying and transport—is meticulously monitored and

optimised. The difference between specialty and industrial coffee is comparable to the distinction between a fine bottle of wine and an ordinary table wine, or between first cold-pressed extra virgin olive oil and a standard blend. Specialty coffee offers unexpected and varied flavours, ranging from chocolate and hazelnut to fruity and floral notes. As Valentina describes, *"It's like wine. You don't need to be a sommelier to enjoy it. You just need to be open and let it surprise you."*

The beginning: Grega and coffee on the race circuit

The story starts with Grega, Valentina's husband and a former professional cyclist. Cyclists who travel thousands of kilometres understand real energy needs. While visiting races across the world, Grega searched for quality coffee. He found it. He learned that specialty coffee does not upset the stomach, cause digestive problems, or lead to sudden energy crashes. Its flavour is richer and more complex. Grega became passionate about coffee, learning from each trip and every expert he met. Today, he has more than 20 years of coffee knowledge under his belt.

Valentina's discovery

When Valentina returned from Hong Kong, Grega persuaded her to try specialty coffee. Until then, Valentina had not been an enthusiastic coffee drinker – on the contrary, the smell of ordinary coffee put her off. *"I didn't want to taste it, because even the smell of regular coffee was awful. But when I smelled this for the first time, it didn't bother me at all,"* she laughs. This marked the beginning of her journey – sip by sip, slowly, with curiosity. Soon, she found herself immersed in tastings, comparisons, and curiosity: *why is this coffee so different? Why does ordinary commercial coffee leave such a different feeling?*

The decision to change

At the time, Valentina worked in Ljubljana. She spent two hours in traffic every day. She began to wonder if this was what she truly wanted. Meanwhile, Grega was nearing the end of his cycling career. They started asking themselves what would make them happy, and the answer was obvious: coffee. *"We were looking for something that interests us both,"* says Valentina, *"and this turned out to be the right compromise."*

Building a brand, step by step

Their decision was careful and gradual. They tested everything before investing. At first, they roasted at another roastery instead of buying equipment right away. Grega focused on roasting and developing coffee profiles. Valentina managed communication, sales, logistics, and their online presence. *"We complement each other,"* she says.

They named the brand **Coffee Iconic** and built it step by step, without unnecessary risk. *"It was important that we didn't put all our money into something and then realise it wasn't right,"* Valentina says.

Štartaj Slovenija: A story worth telling

For promotion, they applied for Štartaj Slovenija – not just for the prize, but for something money cannot buy: the chance to share their story. Valentina explains, *"you couldn't pay for enough advertising to spend that much time in the media telling your story – why specialty coffee is different from what most people drink."* The event was also about education. The specialty coffee market in Slovenia was undeveloped, and customers had to be convinced that the value was real and worth paying for.

Education as part of sales

Selling specialty coffee in Slovenia was a challenge. Prices were much higher than those of commercial brands. *"You can't change the mind of someone who is convinced they're already drinking the best coffee in the world overnight,"* Valentina says with a laugh. *"We give those people time. But those who try our coffee after a while notice the difference and come back."*

Today, they focus on cafés seeking higher-quality offerings and that special finishing touch. *"If you already have a better steak and better wine, you need better coffee too,"* Valentina illustrates. In addition, online sales continue to attract many individual customers, including people from the time of Štartaj Slovenija.

Together, each in their own way

People often ask how to balance their personal and professional lives. Valentina answers immediately: their roles are clearly divided, and they work together seamlessly. They do not have time for business conflicts, they enjoy them too much. Their families help with childcare, and mentors guide them on big decisions. *"It's great to have someone who tells you whether you're thinking clearly or not. Emotionally, you're too close to always see things clearly."*

Advice for those thinking about starting their own business

Valentina is not the type to shower younger generations with romantic stories about entrepreneurship. She knows that behind the dreams lie responsibility, uncertainty, and a demanding daily reality. But her advice is clear: *"When you're selling something you believe in, selling becomes much easier."*

To women thinking about starting their own business, she adds one more important lesson: *“Don’t do everything yourself just to prove that you can. Accept help. There’s no medal for exhausting yourself.”*

Valentina Gazvoda and Grega are proof that it is possible to turn love and knowledge into a lasting business – with a measure of prudence and one step at a time.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 4: Lace at the starting line

Anja Deželak

In running circles, she is known as Čipka – Lace. She got the nickname ten years ago when she moved from a mining community to Trbovlje. She immediately made it her own. *"Many people don’t even know my real name,"* smiles Anja Deželak. The irony is perfect: Čipka is a designer, but she doesn’t know how to make lace. *"This name will be waiting for me for quite a few years yet."*

An accidental path to design

Anja studied landscape architecture. After university, she expected to work in a studio, but no job came. "*I went with the principle: I'll do whatever comes along,*" she says. By chance, she stumbled upon graphic design. She liked it. An opportunity presented itself. She stayed.

Today, she has been working as a freelance designer for eleven years. She builds her path step by step, project by project. Her clients include Slovenian and international running events, sports shops, and companies from various fields. She is currently working with Kočevsko Outdoor and designing graphics for the Kranjska Gora Julian Alps Trail Run. She has created trade fair visuals for the company Lotrič, among many other things. *"It's nice that every day is different,"* she says.

Running as an outlet and a teacher

Anja runs. Seriously. In May, she completed an ultra-trail race in Istria: 110 kilometres and over 4,000 metres of elevation gain. *"Now I'm here,"* she smiles, *"richer for one good experience."*

Running gives her more than physical fitness. It gives her distance. *"On long races, you only deal with one thing: how to get from the start to the finish. Everything else – thoughts, worries, tasks – washes away. That is real rest for me."* Beyond that, the persistent running demands serve her well in business. *"When it's hard, you keep going. That is a skill you learn in the course and carry into everything else."*

She has no interest in watches or apps during training. *"I go out and listen to myself. Once you learn to do that, everything gets easier – and the results come on their own."* Intuition is her guide both in running and in life. *"This intuition has never let me down,"* she adds with a smile.

Designing for those who run

Because she runs and organises events herself, she understands clients from the running community from the inside. *"When I'm designing for a running event, the client doesn't need to explain what they need. I already know."* This understanding has become one of her key strengths.

Together with her husband, she organises the Knap Trail running event in Zasavje. Anja had previously spent three years organising a running event in Idrija. When she received an offer to take over Knap Trail in Trbovlje, she couldn't say no. *"I never saw it as a business idea,"* she emphasises. *"It's our free time. But because we do it with heart and for people, the participants feel that."* The event has become well-known in the region. Every year brings more runners to the starting line – and to Zasavje.

From organising, she has drawn a valuable lesson: *"I learned that you have to look after everyone involved. They should feel they are part of something – and that you are grateful for what they do. We are a real little trail family."*

Mother, designer, runner

When she had her son, her schedule changed fundamentally. *"Before the family, the room to manoeuvre was completely different."* She has tried to create a structured timetable. In practice, she protects her afternoons for family time. *"Being a mother is my clear priority."*

She has also learned to set boundaries – and that was one of the hardest lessons. *"Over the years, I have learned to listen to myself. When the red alarm goes off, I put down the phone and step away from the computer. That is not weakness – it is protecting energy so I can be truly present where it matters."*

A lesson at the finish line

When she crossed the finish line of the ultra trail in Istria, her son called. He asked whether she had won. *"I did,"* she told him, *"for myself."*

That is perhaps the most concise summary of her approach to life: not seconds, not minutes, not hours. It's about achieving the goal you set yourself, and knowing that, in the end, you are reason enough for your own victory.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

Austria

The following stories present the experiences of women living and working in the Styrian Iron Road region, an area with a strong industrial tradition and a labour market historically shaped by male-dominated sectors.

Through their narratives, these stories offer insight into how women navigate career paths, changing opportunities, and everyday responsibilities within this context. They highlight a range of experiences, reflecting both the challenges and the possibilities women encounter while building their professional and personal lives in the region.

(University of Graz, Styrian Iron Road)

STORY 1: Following her gut feeling to the forefront of research

Johanna Irrgeher

She wanted to become a teacher, but life took her down a different path – that of research.

Johanna Irrgeher says she actually wanted to become a teacher. Absurdly, she was advised against it at the time because the job prospects were poor, she says, shaking her head and laughing. The 41-year-old is a professor at the Chair of General and Analytical Chemistry at the Montanuniversität Leoben and one of five women among a total of 50 professors. After graduating from high school, the Upper Austrian decided to study food and biotechnology at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna. A certain family influence played a role: her grandfather taught there, and her father and brother studied there. She had a life-changing experience during her master's degree. Due to the unacceptable supervision situation, she abandoned her first master's thesis and wanted to leave the university quickly. By chance, she came to chemistry. She has never regretted her change. She completed her doctoral studies with distinction. She then moved to Hamburg, where she got a job as a marine research scientist. She commuted between Vienna and Hamburg, but then asked herself where

she wanted to live. In 2018, she returned to Vienna, and shortly afterwards a job opened up at the Montanuniversität. A good decision: she has now settled in Leoben and particularly appreciates the good infrastructure and the surrounding natural landscape.

Important gut decisions

Like most of her decisions, she made the decision to move to Leoben based on her gut feeling. She also recommends this to young women. *'Decisions about studying and jobs are life-changing decisions. But you shouldn't ask yourself whether it's right or wrong. If it feels right at the moment, then you should do it. After all, nothing is set in stone.'* Many people are strongly influenced by the older generation, says the 41-year-old. However, the framework conditions have changed significantly, especially in science. She has often been fortunate to have a supportive network around her. In parallel with professional training, she has always placed great importance on personal development and coaching. *'My biggest challenge is to make more time for myself,'* smiles the chemist. She is often so eager to evaluate her work that she works late into the night. She enjoys her own house with a garden with her husband: her oasis of peace. She loves watching birds and hedgehogs. *'It requires patience and calm. Animals can sense when you're not relaxed.'* She used to compete in triathlons, but now she only does sports in her free time. She has always preferred to set her own goals. Competitive thinking is something she dislikes, and not just in sport. At work, too, she finds judging people based on key figures off-putting – she believes it is more important to be productive and creative. Her motto? *'At the end of the day, I want to be able to look in the mirror and stand by my actions. No matter what others think.'*

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 2: A woman, her path and her place at Erzberg

Julia Vargek-Ipsa

Julia Vargek-Ipsa has made her mark in an industry that is still dominated by men.

She has never regretted her decision for a second. Julia Vargek-Ipsa describes her job as a foreman at Erzberg as the best in the world. As production manager, she organises processes, is responsible for shift scheduling and also for employee safety. She also calls the shots at events such as the Erzbergrodeo and Adventure Days. VA Erzberg GmbH operates the largest open-cast iron ore mine in Central Europe. The company is a major producer of raw materials and mines around three million tonnes of ore annually. Erzberg is also a popular destination for excursions offering a variety of activities. Vargek-Ipsa has always been interested in

technology: *'I actually wanted to become a mechanic after nursing wasn't really my thing,'* smiles the 50-year-old. But then she decided to go to university. After always being drawn to it, as she says, she decided to study mining at the Montanuniversität. *'I told myself I'd try it for a year and see if I liked it. In the end, I stuck with it.'*

Reunion brought change

After completing her studies, Vargek-Ipsa initially moved abroad. Following further positions in Salzburg and Kitzbühel, her path led her back to Erzberg. She had already completed an internship here during her studies. A chance reunion with one of the managing directors years later at a conference set things in motion. *'He said there was a position available that would be interesting for me and that I should apply.'* At that time, the Burgenland native was looking for a career change anyway. She has been working as a district manager at Erzberg since 2018. She sums up her enjoyment of her work in three words: *'I've found my place.'* She never had to overcome any hurdles. Nevertheless, she had to assert herself in a male-dominated working environment. 'As a woman, you have to be twice as capable and prove what you can do. But once that's clear, you're widely accepted.' Equipped with the necessary quick wit – because that's what you need in a male-dominated environment, she says with a wink – she has gone her own way. Her biggest supporters were her parents: *'They always told me to do what I believed in, and they supported me. Without them, I wouldn't be where I am today.'* She herself made a conscious decision not to start a family. *'My studies and my job took priority. I love my work.'* She enjoys every minute she spends outside at the Erzberg. But she also allows herself time off – albeit rarely. *'I enjoy the peace and quiet, preferably with a good book or going cycling.'* She recently got her own garden and is getting to work on it. What advice does the 50-year-old have for

young girls? *'Be brave and follow your own path! Many struggle with clichés and prejudices and don't dare to pursue typically male professions.'*

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 3: A versatile and successful technician

Ines Gindel

'Just do it' is her motto: Ines Gindel works as a materials technician at Ceramant in Wald am Schoberpaß.

When asked what she actually does at her employer Ceramant, Ines Gindel says: *'A lot, thank goodness – and something different every day!'* This proves to be true when you follow the lively materials engineer around the large hall in Wald am Schoberpaß.

The family-run company Ceramant has specialised in wear and coating technology for large machines in the pulp and paper industry for 40 years. Special coatings developed in-house extend the service life of machine parts and allow old machines to be reconditioned. *'We deliver as far as Turkey,'* explains company owner and managing director Peter Müller. *'Because cardboard and paper are used all over the world.'*

The 33-year-old not only puts her skills to perfect use in quality assurance, but also plays a decisive role in the development of new coatings. She checks the consistency of the coating powders in the laboratory, inspects incoming goods and documents the work steps in the company so that everything is in order when it comes to inspection.

After the birth of her third child, Gindel developed a desire to return to her profession – to the job she loves. Her boss is grateful for her versatility and accuracy and values her ability to multitask: *'I can see that she brings special qualities to the company that benefit everyone.'*

Only woman in the production

Apart from the secretary, Gindel is currently the only woman in production – but that is set to change soon. A young applicant has already expressed interest in joining the team. If the mother of three sons (aged four, eight and ten) could give young girls one piece of advice, it would be: *'Just do it.'* She always listens to her gut feeling and knew when she applied that the family business with around 25 employees would be a great fit for her.

Some colleagues have been with the company since it was founded and are about to retire. Others are just starting out and bring fresh ideas with them – just like she did back then. Gindel appreciates her varied work and is grateful that, as a mother of three who is also completing her studies at the Montanuniversität, she can work flexibly. *'With children, there's always the possibility of illness, but I can make up for it later.'*

Her boss, who has three children himself and whose son is now production manager at Ceramant, is very understanding: *'It takes a certain amount of flexibility on both sides.'* The Gaishorn native finds relaxation in the forest or in her herb garden, which she tends to keep her medicine cabinet stocked. *'That's my balance to everything else.'* Otherwise, the mother of three can often be found with her boys on the football pitch.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

Czech Republic

The following stories present the experiences of women living and working in the Sokolovsko region, an area shaped by its industrial past and ongoing socio-economic transformation.

Through their narratives, these stories reflect how women navigate changing labour market conditions, evolving opportunities, and everyday responsibilities within their local context. They highlight diverse life paths, offering insight into both the challenges women face and the ways in which they build their professional and personal lives in the region.

(LAG Sokolovsko – MASS)

STORY 1: From Teacher to Hospital Director: The Inspiring Story of Jitka Bureš Samáková

Jitka Bureš Samáková

Her story proves that successful careers often take unexpected paths - from her original dream of a legal profession, she became a respected healthcare manager.

From Shy Teacher to Confident Manager

Jitka's journey began with teaching at a high school. *"I simply had to start speaking. I was trembling, but I discovered that the children accepted me, respected me, listened to me."* School

taught her to overcome shyness and find her gift for communication, which later proved very valuable.

For financial reasons, she moved to work as a social worker at the municipal office while simultaneously completing her university education by distance learning. *"It was demanding - child, family, work, and studies on top of that. But the ambition to achieve something was stronger."* Her approach even inspired her daughter: *"When you completed university while working, I have to complete university normally."*

Political "Detour" and Lessons Learned

An interesting chapter was her period in municipal politics. *"The city council was all men. In the city assembly, there were perhaps only two women."* The experience revealed to her the nuances of a male-dominated environment: *"I felt that the men somewhat overlooked my opinion."*

Eventually, she left politics: *"I'm someone who wants to do something, to move forward somewhere, and politics isn't always about this."*

Healthcare as a Life Challenge

The turning point came with a position as an economist in a hospital. *"Understanding the healthcare system was the most difficult. How it's paid for, how it's reported, who pays for it."* But persistence won: *"I mastered it within a year - I was driven by the motivation: if you want to stay here, you have to learn it."*

When she got her first opportunity to lead a hospital, she hit her own limits. "*It became apparent that I couldn't delegate. It started to overwhelm me.*" With her typical honesty, she admitted: *"I told the director that I couldn't handle it, that I didn't want to be a director."*

Second Chance and Leadership Philosophy

Years later, she was asked to lead the Karlovy Vary Regional Hospital - this time, better prepared. Four years, including the COVID period, taught her the power of teamwork: *"I discovered that people came together much more. We could talk to each other, respect each other, help each other."*

Today, she leads Sokolov Hospital with a philosophy of an active approach. She practices *"gemba"* - regularly working directly in operations. *"I spent time peeling potatoes, was at the dishwasher, and served lunches. One doctor said it was a provocation, but it's about understanding the real operation."*

Women in Healthcare Leadership

Currently, there are many women in leadership positions within the Penta Hospitals group. *"We're almost half and half among the hospitals."* She believes women bring a different approach: *"There's no ego and testosterone there. For me, it's important to respect everyone, because they're there to do their job the best they can."*

Karlovy Vary Region Has Potential

Jitka believes in the region: *"I don't think we're an ugly region. We have a unique nature, young people can ski here, ride cycling paths."* To attract young healthcare workers, she suggests: *"We're*

considering camps for medical students - to show them they'll want to return to our region after school."

"We must stop saying we're the poorest, smallest. We need to refute this, because it's not true," she appeals for a change in regional perception.

Advice for the Young

For future generations, she has a clear message: *"It's important to have patience, some humility, and persistence. Do what makes you feel needed and what you enjoy. It's not about university - some professions don't require it, but you must be good at what you do."*

The story of Ing. Jitka Bureš Samáková shows that a successful career doesn't have to be planned from the beginning. It's important to stay open to opportunities, not be afraid to admit your own limits, and learn from mistakes.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 2: The Only Woman Among 68 Directors: The Inspiring Story of Klara Sokolova from O-I Glassworks

Klara Sokolova

Her story proves that a successful career can take unexpected paths - from quality management to the top of an industrial plant with a 145-year tradition.

From Quality Expert to First Female Director

Klara started at the company right after university in the quality department, never imagining she would one day lead an entire plant. For nineteen years, she built her expertise and learned production down to the smallest details. The breakthrough moment came during training at the American headquarters: *"It actually never occurred to me in my life to be a plant director. Only when I heard about that woman in Peru, I thought to myself: if it worked there, why not here?"*

Thanks to the employee development system, she had the opportunity to travel and experience different cultures: *"It enriches you as a person, you have to look at it openly."* These experiences opened her eyes to new possibilities.

Key Decision and Management Support

The turning point came during a development interview with HR. *"I admit that I honestly said that if I were a guy, my next position would probably be plant director. I was also surprised that I said it out loud."*

The company's management surprised her with their reaction: *"There was a quick round where everyone perked up - aha, okay then. We talked about whether this was the path, or whether I would be afraid."*

Unique Position in a Male-Dominated World

Today, she is the only woman among 68 plant directors in the entire international O-I group. Instead of seeing it as a burden, she views it as an opportunity to bring a different approach: *"I think women have a slightly different approach to things. There's no ego and testosterone, where men sometimes compete with each other. For me, it's important to respect everyone, because they're there to do their job the best they can."*

Colleagues from regional positions welcomed her: *"They came to me saying: hey, this is great, finally one of us. That surprised and pleased me."*

Tradition and Modern Challenges

The Nové Sedlo plant has a remarkable 145-year history. *"The entire town was built for the plant, and glass bottles have been manufactured there ever since."* Today it produces an average of 1.3 million bottles daily in continuous 24/7 operation.

"When there's a big problem, we call each other. Otherwise, we have people on each shift who should handle it," Klara describes the specifics of managing non-stop operations.

Fair Conditions for Everyone

O-I has addressed gender pay gaps: *"They evaluate a skill matrix - what you can handle, where you're progressing. That's excellent."* The system works based on clear and measurable criteria according to qualifications and abilities.

Unconventional Educational Path

Klara's journey was diverse - she started studying non-woven textiles in Liberec, continued with economics in Prague, and culminated with Erasmus in Berlin. *"People shouldn't set barriers for themselves and say 'never'. Because you never know where life will take you."*

The international experience changed her perspective: *"I started being proud of being Czech. I realised that we're not as bad as we think we are. Czechs really underestimate themselves."*

Fighting Against Prejudices

Klara criticises outdated approaches in education. When a teacher told children during a plant tour: "If you don't study well, you'll end up in a factory too," she responded firmly: *"That's a wrong perspective. These are professionals who are very well paid for their work."*

Advice for the Younger Generation

For young women considering a career in industry, she has a clear message: *"They definitely shouldn't be afraid. Every day is different, every day you learn something new, and you produce something that has value. Don't listen to others, especially when you feel you're a technical type."*

"When you're afraid, you can't do it. You have to feel that you can handle it," she adds with conviction.

Faith in the Future of Glassmaking

Klara believes in the future of the industry: *"It's important to stay unique, maintain excellent quality. I believe we can do it, but you have to want it."*

Klara Sokolova's story shows that courage to cross boundaries and faith in one's own abilities can open doors even in the most traditional industries. The important thing is not to be afraid to voice your ambitions and be ready to seize opportunities when they arise.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 3: From Restaurant to Innovative Meal Box Programs: The Story of Lucie Jejkalová, Who Wasn't Afraid to Start Over

Lucie Jejkalová

Her story is inspiring proof that even through difficult life trials, you can build a successful business – if you have the courage not to give up.

From MLM to Running a Nightclub

Lucie's entrepreneurial journey began unconventionally. Already at 19, she realised that "*you won't find millions in the library*" and that school wouldn't teach her how to earn the money she needed to fulfil her dreams. That's why she jumped into the MLM business. At 22, another bold choice came – leasing the Žába nightclub in Nejdek.

"It was a popular nightclub, but the night business was wild." Lucie recalls. "*It was an extremely demanding period, but it taught me the value of money and work. I realised that money isn't free – behind it is energy, people, and a lot of work."*

A Dream from Age Fourteen Returns at the Worst Possible Moment

After the nightclub, came work at a state enterprise as head of catering, and then insurance, where Lucie worked her way up to become a successful saleswoman. But then the dream from when she was fourteen returned – to have her own restaurant.

And it came back at the least suitable time – in June 2020, after the first wave of COVID. *"My mom was tapping her head, saying I was crazy. I told her: It's just the flu, mom, please, you're all going crazy over that TV. I know what I'm doing, I'll manage it,"* Lucie recalls with irony about her own naivety.

COVID Reality: From Enthusiasm to Thoughts of Ending It All

They opened on August 1, 2020. They were open for about two months and then were shut down. *"I think it was September or October. They closed us for about three months. Then they opened us in December for fourteen days – for Christmas. And then closed us again for two months."*

Each closure meant throwing away ingredients, financial losses, and uncertainty. But Lucie decided to keep her team. Especially one chef with three children. *"I supported him for a whole year. The idea that he had three children at home and no work was so sensitive for me. I told myself that when we open, he'll pay me back."*

Because she hadn't been in the business for more than half a year, she didn't receive state subsidies. The only support was a thousand crowns a day, 30 thousand a month. *"From that, I gave more than half to the chef. My financial cushion ran out pretty quickly. I stopped paying for electricity. I chose what to pay now and what later."*

And then came that dark moment: *"I was sitting in my car around three in the morning at Jimlíkov, and I wanted to take my own life – drown myself there. It was terribly difficult. I didn't know when they'd open us, if at all, or how it would be. I couldn't see a solution."*

The Strength Not to Give Up

What saved her? *"Something inside me told me I couldn't do that to the people who helped me. I couldn't do it to my mom. And I told myself – the bailiffs haven't come yet, they're not banging on my door yet, so there's probably still a chance to save it."*

She sold her nice car, bought a *"beater,"* took the deposit barrels to Makro to have some cash. *"I didn't tell anyone about it. I completely forgot about it – I pushed it out of my head. Only after a year, at some ball, my friends suddenly reminded me, and I burst into tears."*

Slowly, after reopening in 2021, the restaurant began to recover. *"It took about another two and a half years before I paid off all the loans. My personal life for the last five years is zero. I had to give up absolutely everything for four years."*

Foody Boxes: The Courage to Start Again

And just when the situation began to stabilise, an idea for another business came – meal box programs Foody. *"I keep trying to stick to some diet, which I then don't stick to, because I love food. So I told myself – if I don't want to diet and cook, I'll just start a company for it."*

But after her COVID experiences, she was afraid. *"I put it off for half a year. Uncle Fear came, reminding me what I'd been through. I was scared to start something new again."*

What finally convinced her? *"The vision of the potential. And people around me told me there would be interest. In January 2024, we launched Foody Boxes – healthy meal box programs with local ingredients."*

What Makes Foody Different?

Lucie connects meal box programs with local trainers, a nutritional advisor, and supports Karlovy Vary athletes like Olympian Martin Rubeš or the Energie hockey players. *"I want to support local people who are talented and want to achieve something."*

The biggest reward is clients' results: *"We have clients who've lost 18-20 kilos. One man came like a little barrel, two chins. After three months, I didn't recognise him – a completely different person, full of confidence and positive energy. That's why I do this."*

Women in Gastronomy and Prejudices

As a young woman in gastronomy, Lucie encountered prejudices. *"Three times a week, I heard from my sponsor that I could never afford this on my own – a restaurant at such a young age. It really offended me."*

Even today, it happens that a salesman comes and wants to speak with the owner. *"I say I'm the owner. And they say: Sure you are. I always say – I know, I'm young, I don't look like it."*

Her advice for other women? *"Don't be afraid. Have confidence and believe in what you're doing. If you're selling a good product, you have to stand behind it."*

Life Lessons

"If I'm proud of anything, it's just that I didn't give up. And the friends around me who didn't leave me hanging," Lucie says modestly.

"People think entrepreneurship is easy. They don't have even 5% understanding of everything you have to deal with. You can act like everything's great, but it's not easy at all. If you think you have problems, try entrepreneurship – then you'll really experience problems."

Still, she adds: *"I'm glad for what happened to me. It gave me character, humility, and taught me to appreciate things. It toughened me up. And most importantly, I learned that there's always a way."*

Lucie Jejkalová's story shows that a successful entrepreneur doesn't need to have everything planned from the start. What's important is not giving up even in the toughest moments, not being afraid to ask for help, and believing that even after the worst storm, the sun will come.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

Hungary

The following stories present the experiences of women living and working in the Central Transdanubia region, a region influenced by its industrial background and ongoing economic transformation.

Through their narratives, these stories reveal how women navigate shifting opportunities, structural constraints, and everyday expectations, while building their own paths. They reflect diverse experiences, highlighting both the challenges and the resilience of women in this local context.

(CTRIA)

STORY 1: The journey of a female leader in a male-dominated world

Katalin Ádám

Katalin Ádám is a 67-year-old economist, certified accountant and tax advisor from Tatabánya, who has spent her entire life in the construction industry – a field where it has been particularly difficult for women to succeed. She began her career in the late 1970s at KOMÉP (Komárom County State Construction Company), the large construction enterprise of the socialist era, which was liquidated following the political transition in 1991. When Makett Ltd., established from the remnants of the dissolved KOMÉP, was also liquidated, she took control of her own destiny. In 1994, she founded T-Mátrix Ltd., whose main activity is general contracting, and she has worked there as Managing Director ever since.

It was not an easy path. As a woman – and without a traditional construction-related qualification – she often had to prove herself. There were many occasions when partners preferred to contact her male colleagues, bypassing her. In such situations, she had to act

firmly, even when it did not come naturally to her. *"I had to learn to be tough while remaining a woman,"* she reflected. The first ten to fifteen years were particularly demanding, but her perseverance eventually paid off.

For Katalin, however, work was never just about business. She has always considered community and helping others to be important. She began her public engagement as a trade union leader and later founded the *"Mértékadó Nők Társasága"* (Association of Influential Women), after feeling that official organisations did not provide real space for women's voices. Over time, the association's focus shifted: from business cooperation to representing the values women bring.

According to her experience, the situation of women remains contradictory even today. Although much has changed, women still frequently find themselves at a disadvantage. She sees the reconciliation of work and family life as particularly challenging: having children interrupts careers for years, while social support systems fail to adapt to real needs. *"What is needed is not primarily money, but functioning support – for example, childcare that aligns with parents' working hours,"* she emphasises.

In her own life, she instinctively strove for balance. Family always remained a priority, even when work demanded enormous energy. She often took her child with her to workplace meetings, and the support of her family – especially her husband and mother – played a significant role. She believes that maintaining balance is key: once it is lost, everything else can easily fall apart.

At the same time, Katalin observes the modern world with a critical eye. She is concerned about the weakening of communities and the growing gap between generations. She feels that

younger generations think differently, and that it is difficult to connect with them. She misses the genuine human relationships that were natural in her own life.

Regarding the future, she is both realistic and hopeful. She would like to hand over her business to her son and trust that the next generation will find its own direction. At the same time, it is important to her that women become stronger and more independent. *"Do not be a servant, be a woman – create your own existence"* is the message she would most like to pass on.

Katalin's story is not only the story of a successful career, but also of a woman who preserved her identity in a male-dominated world while striving to help others. Her example shows that with perseverance, courage and strong values, it is possible to find one's path even in the most challenging environments.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 2: A life in service of the community

Zsuzsanna Judit

The story of Takács Zsuzsanna Judit is not one of spectacular career-building, but of persistent, value-creating work and commitment to the community. The 70-year-old professional was born in Tata and has remained loyal to her hometown throughout her life.

She began her studies in biology and chemistry, then graduated from the Faculty of Food Industry at the University of Horticulture. She started her career at the Tatabánya Slaughterhouse, and then worked for nearly a decade as a food hygiene specialist. This period proved formative for her: it was here that she learned the fundamentals of communication, negotiation and cooperation, skills that accompanied her throughout her entire career.

The truly exciting phase of her career began in the late 1980s, when following a restructuring she became the county executive director of METESZ (Federation of Technical and Scientific Associations). This role opened new horizons for her: she had to organise, coordinate and develop simultaneously. Later, she also led the secretariats of the Chamber of Engineers and then the Chamber of Architects, creating a unique cooperation between the different organisations. This model not only resulted in more efficient operation, but also contributed to resolving professional conflicts.

Interestingly, Zsuzsanna never experienced working in a male-dominated field as a disadvantage. Although at the beginning of her career her professional background was occasionally questioned, collaborative work and proven performance quickly brought her acceptance. *"We learned this together,"* she said, referring to the period when the chamber system was still taking shape.

Community plays a central role in her story. She not only worked in professional organisations, but also spent many years working in the Által-ér Association, an organisation established in 1994 for the restoration and environmentally conscious development of Tata's Old Lake, its catchment area and wider surroundings, and she remains active in the local climate community to this day. For her, Tata is not merely a place of residence, but part of her identity and sense of belonging.

Balancing family and work came naturally to her, yet it was still a considerable challenge. Raising children, commuting daily and the period of building a house represented both physical and mental strain. She believes her generation had extraordinary resilience, while also recognising

that in some respects young people today have an easier situation thanks to more flexible working arrangements and technological progress.

Among her personal experiences, particularly memorable are her daughter's graduation ceremony in Venice and her son's Hungarian championship victories, which represented not only pride but also the fulfilment of parenthood for her. *"It is a wonderful thing to be a parent,"* she said simply, yet meaningfully.

She speaks in balanced terms about opportunities for women in the region. In her view, Komárom-Esztergom County is in a relatively favourable position: both educated and less educated women have opportunities, whether in production, administration or the public sector. She highlights that more and more women are appearing in leadership positions, and that family roles are becoming more balanced among younger generations.

Regarding the future, she does not formulate grand ambitions, but rather simple yet meaningful goals: to remain active, to continue working for some time, to spend more time with her family and grandchildren, and to preserve the joy of movement – whether rowing or skiing.

Zsuzsanna's story shows that success is not always spectacular. Sometimes it lies in doing one's work reliably, consistently and with humanity over many years – while building community, creating connections, and leaving a mark on the lives of others.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 3: Balance, adaptation and working for the community

Noémi Farkas

Noémi is a 50-year-old lawyer who lives and works in Tatabánya, although she was born in Esztergom. Her career choice was greatly influenced by her family background: both of her parents were lawyers, so this path seemed almost natural to her, even though as a child she would rather have become a florist. In the end, she grew to love law, graduated in Szeged, and then began her professional career in Budapest.

At the beginning of her career, she worked in a multinational environment at Telekom as a telecommunications lawyer. This period was particularly important for her: she became familiar with international corporate culture, teamwork and complex thinking, all of which later shaped

her professional outlook. However, when she started a family, she made a conscious decision to return to Tatabánya in order to better balance work and private life.

In Tatabánya, she worked as a lawyer, primarily for local governments and transport companies. Later, she became the legal director of a regional public road passenger transport company, and after organisational restructuring she looked for a new direction. At that point, she decided to continue her education and studied tourism development at Corvinus University with the aim of taking an active role in the city's development. Today, she works in the field of economic development, where she is able to utilise both her legal expertise and her new perspective.

During her career, Noémi never felt disadvantaged as a woman. She believes this is partly a matter of personality and partly a matter of environment. She has always considered herself a team player and never aspired to top executive positions. At the same time, she sees the systemic differences: there are still fewer women in strategic and senior management roles, while their presence is already more balanced at middle-management level.

She considers balancing work and private life to be a challenge, but not exclusively a women's issue. In her view, it is equally difficult for men, just in different ways. She believes that today's world – thanks to flexible working arrangements, home office opportunities and technological development – offers far more possibilities for achieving balance. This is also reflected in her own leadership approach: what matters is not when or where someone works, but whether the task is completed properly and on time.

She presents a nuanced view of women's opportunities in the labour market. According to her, women are more strongly represented in certain fields – such as public administration,

education or healthcare – while they are still underrepresented in strategic decision-making and senior leadership positions. She also considers corporate culture and international background to be important factors: companies from certain countries are more open to diverse leadership, while others are less flexible in this regard.

One of the most defining experiences of her life was returning to university as an adult. The new knowledge she gained at Corvinus represented not only professional development, but also personal confirmation: she experienced the true meaning of lifelong learning and realised that she was capable of applying the knowledge she had acquired in practice.

In her private life, her greatest joy and achievement at present are the successes of her son, who is already gaining professional experience alongside his university studies and approaches work with enthusiasm. For her, this is not only a source of pride but also confirmation that, as a parent, she has succeeded in passing on values that help her child build an independent future.

Noémi's motivation comes from working for the community. She believes that Tatabánya can develop if professional considerations take precedence over political interests and if the city's stakeholders are able to cooperate. She is not thinking in terms of competing with larger cities, but rather in making Tatabánya a more liveable place for its residents.

In difficult times, she believes adaptation and replanning are what help most. She consciously looks for solutions, develops several alternatives, and believes that consistent and fair work brings results in the long term.

Noémi's story shows that success cannot necessarily be measured in positions. Rather, it lies in whether someone is able to create balance, adapt to change, and create value in the process – not only for themselves, but also for their community.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The following stories present the experiences of women living and working in the Hercegbosnian Canton 10, reflecting the specific conditions of the local labour market and broader social context.

Through their narratives, these stories offer insight into how women navigate administrative barriers, limited resources, and the realities of everyday life, while finding ways to initiate their own projects, develop business ideas, and actively contribute to their communities. They highlight a range of life situations, showing both the challenges women face and the opportunities they create for themselves within their local environment.

At the same time, these stories provide a grounded and realistic perspective on what it means to build a professional path in a peripheral industrial region. They serve not only as a source of inspiration, but also as an honest reflection of the conditions, constraints, and possibilities that shape women's experiences in this context.

(Ministry of Economy Affairs of Hercegbosnian Canton, Employment Office of Herceg-Bosnian Canton)

STORY 1: My main motivation comes from people's feedback

Marija Perković

Introduce yourself and tell us about your work.

My name is Marija Perković. I work as an English teacher at a high school in Livno. I also run a tourism business with my husband. I am the organizer of the Canosa Baira event on the Sturba River and birdwatching activities in Livno Field.

What is your main motivation?

My main motivation comes from people's feedback. When people are happy and satisfied, it feels like the greatest victory in the world, lifting you up.

What challenges or obstacles have you faced?

The biggest challenge was definitely the lack of information. It was difficult to find the right details — knowing who to contact, which door to knock on, and where to go next. This is a major issue when it comes to administration and bureaucracy.

What are your hopes and dreams for the future, personally and for the local community?

We hope to expand our business, involve more people from the community, and connect different local enterprises. We also hope to become better known in tourism circles and attract more visitors in the future.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 2: It all started with my idea for tourism

Stana Kovljenić

Introduce yourself and tell us about yourself and your work.

My name is Stana Kovljenić. I am from Nuglašice, near Bosansko Grahovo, and I have been in this business for over 20 years. I have been working on it with great pleasure from 2009 until today. I truly enjoy it, but it is difficult to find people willing to work with me on projects. For now, I am doing it alone.

What motivated you to start this work?

I started when my husband was the director of several hotels, which helped me find my role, and I gladly accepted it.

Can you tell us about the challenges you faced?

I wouldn't say I faced enormous problems. It all started in Bosansko Grahovo with my idea for tourism, so I requested a refrigerator and other equipment. I surprisingly succeeded, and I say "surprisingly" because those were different times (2000–2007).

What are your wishes and hopes for the future, personally and for your community?

I sincerely hope that someone will continue this tradition. My older son is more than interested in pursuing this work with his colleagues, so I know that all my efforts will not be in vain.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 3: My motivation comes from meeting people in the community

Courtney Dunn

Introduce yourself and tell us about your work.

My name is Courtney. I am from America — a real American. I have been living here for four years and run a small home bakery. I bake American-style goods and share some of the wonderful things from back home.

What motivated you to do this work?

My motivation comes from meeting people in the community. I want people to know that Jesus is with everyone. I also collaborate with churches in Split and across Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is how I stay connected and active in the community.

Have you faced any challenges or obstacles?

Yes, it has been difficult to understand what is required — the paperwork and administrative registrations. It can be confusing to figure out exactly what needs to be prepared.

What are your hopes and dreams for the future — for yourself and for the local community?

My dream is for people to know that they can have hope, and that they can try something new or different. We will see how things develop, but I believe that change is possible here. And I hope people will come to know and love Jesus.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

Serbia

The following stories present the experiences of women living and working in the Loznica region, where labour market opportunities are shaped by local conditions and social expectations.

Through their narratives, these stories reveal how women navigate these realities, balance multiple roles, and create their own paths despite challenges. They reflect diverse experiences, highlighting both the obstacles women face and their resilience within the local context.

(Association of Business Women in Serbia)

STORY 1: Bridging cultures through tourism

Minami Hoshino

Minami Hoshino is a unique and inspiring presence in Loznica – at the time of filming the videos, she was the only Japanese woman living and working in the city. She arrived in Serbia through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) volunteer programme, driven by her interest in Eastern Europe and cultural exchange.

From May 2024 until recently, Minami worked with the Tourism Organization of the City of Loznica, where she contributed to strengthening international cooperation and promoting local tourism. Her academic background in Eastern European studies helped her adapt quickly, but it was the warmth of the people that made her feel truly at home.

Minami highlighted hospitality as one of the most striking differences between Japan and Serbia. In Loznica, she found openness, daily interactions, and a genuine interest in personal connections that are less common in Japanese culture. This sense of community made her feel that Loznica had become her *"second home."*

From a professional perspective, she observed that women in Serbia – especially in Loznica – were highly active, entrepreneurial, and confident in leadership roles. Compared to Japan, she noted a stronger presence of women running small businesses, often transforming their passions and traditional skills into sources of income.

She particularly appreciated the creativity and willingness of local women to experiment, collaborate, and openly share ideas. According to Minami, this culture of exchange and mutual support was something that could inspire similar practices in Japan.

At the same time, she recognized opportunities for improvement. One of her key suggestions was stronger international promotion of traditional Serbian crafts, such as wool felting and weaving. She pointed out that these authentic products had great appeal for foreign visitors but were not always easily accessible or visible, especially to those who did not speak the language.

Minami also emphasized the importance of digital tools and online platforms for small business growth, as well as better awareness of available financial support and subsidies for entrepreneurs.

After completing her volunteer engagement in Loznica, Minami returned to Japan, carrying with her valuable experiences and strong personal connections. Through her journey, she

represented a bridge between cultures – bringing a fresh perspective while deeply appreciating the local environment. Her story remains a testament to the power of international exchange and the importance of supporting women in creating sustainable and creative careers.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 2: Building resilience through entrepreneurship

Ljiljana Matković

Ljiljana Matković is a long-standing entrepreneur from Loznica and the owner and director of EKO TIM Ltd. Loznica, a company specializing in pest control and hygiene services. With more than 30 years of experience in private business, she has built a company that today provides services to over 500 clients in the fields of communal hygiene and agriculture.

Her entrepreneurial journey began under extremely challenging circumstances. At the time, she was starting from scratch in a difficult socio-economic environment, while also facing a deeply personal challenge-having arrived in Loznica as a refugee from Sarajevo. Determined to rebuild her life, she had to create new opportunities for herself and secure a livelihood for her family.

Over the years, EKO TIM Ltd. gradually expanded from a small number of clients to a recognized and trusted company across the region of Western Serbia. One of the most significant turning points in the company's development came during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a business operating in disinfection, pest control, and sanitation, the company was expected to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis. Through adaptability, continuous learning, and experience, Ljiljana and her team successfully overcame this challenge.

Another important step forward was the introduction of digitalization into the company's operations. By implementing the PestScan platform, EKO TIM reduced extensive paperwork and improved efficiency, especially in meeting strict standards required in industries such as food production and processing. This innovation allowed the company to become more competitive, responsive, and better aligned with modern market demands.

As a woman entrepreneur in a smaller community, Ljiljana also faced prejudice and systemic barriers, particularly in the early years of her career. At a time when there were no financial incentives, support programs, or a favorable environment for women in business, she had to rely entirely on her own initiative and perseverance. Although such challenges have not completely disappeared, she notes that attitudes are gradually changing.

Ljiljana emphasizes that entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in contributing to the economy and improving quality of life, both locally and nationally. She also highlights the importance of networking and mutual support among women entrepreneurs, seeing it as a key factor in overcoming stereotypes and strengthening their position in society.

Reflecting on the past decades, she recognizes significant progress compared to the 1990s. With the rise of the internet, social media, and digital tools, today's environment offers more

opportunities and visibility for women entrepreneurs, making it easier for them to develop and promote their businesses.

Through her story, Ljiljana Matković represents resilience, determination, and the strength required to build a successful business despite adversity. Her journey serves as an inspiration for future generations of women entrepreneurs in Loznica and beyond.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 3: Turning vision into reality through tourism

Slobodanka Coka Stević

Slobodanka Coka Stević is an experienced entrepreneur from Loznica, with more than 30 years of work in the tourism sector. As the owner and director of Kondor Tis Ltd, she manages two travel agencies-one in Loznica and one in Belgrade-as well as Hotel HEBA on Divčibare. For her, tourism is not just a profession, but a lifelong passion and a way of connecting people, stories, and destinations.

Her entrepreneurial journey began with a clear decision to take responsibility for her own path- both successes and failures. Driven by a strong vision, she gradually built her business from the ground up, transforming ideas into tangible achievements. From opening her first travel agency to expanding her operations and eventually building a hotel, each step was the result of persistence, strategic thinking, and long-term dedication.

One of the most challenging moments in her career came at the very beginning, when she started her business during the period of the NATO bombing in 1999. Operating in such an unstable environment required courage, resilience, and the ability to adapt quickly to uncertainty. Despite these circumstances, she remained focused on her goals and continued to grow her business.

As a woman entrepreneur, Slobodanka also faced the challenge of balancing multiple roles- being a business owner, a mother, and managing household responsibilities at the same time. In a society where women were often not equally recognized in business, she had to work harder to prove her capabilities and build credibility. Over time, through consistent effort and results, she overcame these barriers.

She emphasizes that obstacles are an inevitable part of any entrepreneurial journey, but also a valuable source of learning and growth. Failures and setbacks, as she notes, make entrepreneurs stronger, more resilient, and better prepared for future challenges.

Slobodanka also highlights the importance of community and mutual support, especially among women. Through connections with other women in Loznica, she finds inspiration, understanding, and encouragement to continue developing both personally and professionally.

Her story reflects the importance of determination, vision, and belief in one's goals. By following her ambitions with persistence and confidence, she has built a successful and sustainable business in tourism. Today, her journey serves as an inspiration for women entrepreneurs, showing that even in the most difficult circumstances, it is possible to create opportunities and achieve long-term success.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 4: Creating a living story through rural tourism

Zorica Stefanović

Zorica Stefanović is a rural tourism entrepreneur and the owner of the ethno household Šurička Bajka. Together with her husband, she has been developing this unique place over the past five years, creating an authentic experience rooted in tradition, nature, and genuine human connection. For her, this is not just a business, but a way of life filled with love, energy, and dedication.

Her journey into entrepreneurship began during the COVID-19 pandemic, when her husband, a musician, lost his job. Faced with uncertainty, they decided to turn to their home and surroundings-renovating, building, and shaping their household with their own hands and resources. Step by step, they created a space that today welcomes guests who leave with lasting impressions and a strong emotional connection to the place.

Before starting this venture, Zorica's life path included many different roles-from running a family café business, to dedicating years to raising her three sons, and later working in Belgrade as a nanny. Each of these experiences contributed to her ability to connect with people, which today represents one of the core values of Šurička Bajka.

Building the household has not been without challenges. With limited financial resources, everything has been developed gradually, relying mostly on their own work and creativity. Despite this, their commitment to quality and authenticity has remained constant, and their vision continues to grow.

What makes her approach to tourism unique is the deep connection she creates with her guests. There is no strict boundary between private and business life-guests become part of their everyday environment, sharing the home, the yard, and the experience. As she describes it, they do not just run Šurička Bajka-they truly live it together with their visitors.

Zorica also recognizes the importance of supporting women, especially in rural areas. She highlights the growing number of women engaging in traditional crafts and small businesses, as well as the need for stronger connections, collaboration, and mutual support. She believes that creating networks or informal groups could help women share knowledge, support each other, and grow together.

Her story reflects resilience, creativity, and the power of starting small but with purpose. Through dedication and authenticity, she has built not just a business, but a place that tells a story-one that continues to inspire both visitors and future women entrepreneurs.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 5: Blending art and entrepreneurship through textile design

Angelina Marković

Angelina Marković is an artist and textile designer from Loznica, whose work combines creativity, personal expression, and applied design. Educated at the Faculty of Applied Arts, University of Arts in Belgrade, she specializes in textile design, using fabric as a medium to express emotions, ideas, and artistic concepts. Alongside her artistic practice, she also develops designs that can be applied to everyday objects, merging art with functionality.

Her professional journey has taken her beyond Serbia, with experience gained in Asia as well as in Belgrade. However, she chose to return to Loznica in search of inspiration, balance, and a closer connection to nature. Surrounded by landscapes that offer both calm and creative energy, she found the environment that allows her to reset, reflect, and develop new ideas.

In addition to her independent artistic work and exhibitions, Angelina recently opened her own art studio in Loznica, where she works with both children and adults. Through teaching and shared creative processes, she is building a local community centered around art, learning, and expression.

As a young mother and entrepreneur, she faces the ongoing challenge of balancing family life with creative work. She highlights the complexity of managing multiple responsibilities in a single day, especially in a society where much of the workload still falls on women. Despite these challenges, she continues to pursue her artistic path with determination.

Angelina describes herself as an “artist-entrepreneur,” aiming to transform her art into a sustainable source of income. This transition is not always easy, particularly in smaller communities where access to cultural content and artistic networks can be limited. However, she actively seeks inspiration through travel, cultural events, and connections with larger cities such as Belgrade and Novi Sad.

She also emphasizes the importance of visibility and exchange-new people, visitors, and audiences play a key role in supporting creative work. Through her studio and artistic presence, she contributes to enriching the cultural life of Loznica.

Her story represents a contemporary perspective on entrepreneurship-one that blends creativity, resilience, and adaptability. By connecting art with everyday life and business, Angelina Marković is shaping a path that inspires others to pursue their passions and create their own opportunities.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 6: Resilience and entrepreneurship through hard work

Olivera Tešić

Olivera Tešić is an entrepreneur from Loznica who has built her livelihood through determination, adaptability, and continuous work across multiple fields. As the owner of a

beauty salon, she also engages in vegetable production, flower sales, and the preparation of homemade winter preserves, creating diverse sources of income to support her household.

Her journey into entrepreneurship was not a straightforward one. At the age of 26, during pregnancy, she was diagnosed with cancer. The cost of treatment placed a heavy financial burden on her and her family, leading to years of struggle to repay debts and regain stability. This experience shaped her strong drive to work, earn, and secure a stable future.

Out of necessity, Olivera explored many different types of work, taking every opportunity to earn. Her first business steps began with selling flowers, a field she initially knew nothing about. Through observation, learning, and persistence, she gradually developed knowledge and skills, turning it into a sustainable seasonal business.

Recognizing the limitations of seasonal income, she expanded into vegetable production, ensuring year-round earnings. Over time, new opportunities emerged, including training for manicure and pedicure services, which led her to open her own beauty salon-a profession she continues to pursue today.

Olivera's path was also shaped by challenges related to disability and limited employment opportunities. Although she once pursued a career in education, she faced barriers in the job market. Instead of giving up, she redirected her path toward entrepreneurship, where she could create her own opportunities.

Her story highlights the importance of persistence, especially for women. She believes that the ability to rise after every setback and continue moving forward is key to success. Through

constant work-from morning until evening-she demonstrates a strong sense of responsibility and dedication.

Beyond financial independence, her motivation is also deeply personal: to prove that she is equally capable, regardless of obstacles. Looking ahead, Olivera expresses a desire to explore new ventures, including opening a hospitality business, showing that her entrepreneurial spirit continues to grow.

Her story is a powerful example of resilience and hard work-illustrating how determination, adaptability, and courage can transform life challenges into opportunities for growth and success.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 7: Continuing tradition through modern entrepreneurship

Anastasija Kuzmanović

Anastasija Kuzmanović is a young entrepreneur from Loznica and the director of the family-owned company Fabrika čarapa KIKA d.o.o. Loznica, (KIKA Sock Factory Ltd. Loznica), which specializes in the production of cotton socks for both children and adults. Founded in 1997, the company represents a long-standing tradition of domestic manufacturing, combining quality, experience, and dedication to the craft.

Having grown up surrounded by the business, Anastasija developed an early understanding of entrepreneurship. The factory was always a part of her everyday life, shaping her interest in continuing the family legacy. Today, she is focused on preserving that tradition while

introducing modern approaches, new ideas, and innovative methods of management and production.

Taking on a leadership role at a young age comes with its challenges, especially within a family business. Working alongside her parents, who bring years of experience, Anastasija continues to learn while gradually building her own path and authority within the company. She recognizes the importance of earning her position through effort, knowledge, and commitment.

One of her key goals is to modernize certain aspects of the business-improving production processes, enhancing marketing strategies, and expanding into online sales-while maintaining the core values that have defined the company for decades.

Anastasija also highlights the broader challenges faced by young people and women in business. She believes that success depends largely on self-confidence, persistence, and hard work, rather than external circumstances. According to her, when individuals believe in themselves, their environment begins to recognize and support their efforts.

As a young mother, she navigates the balance between professional responsibilities and family life through careful organization and strong support from those around her. Within the company, she describes a close-knit team of around twenty employees-many of whom have been with the business for decades-creating an environment that feels more like a family than a workplace.

Through her leadership, Anastasija Kuzmanović represents a new generation of entrepreneurs-one that respects tradition while embracing change, and that builds the future through knowledge, resilience, and continuous growth.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

Bulgaria

The following stories present the experiences of women living and working in the Radomir region, where labour market opportunities are often shaped by local conditions and structural constraints.

Through their narratives, these stories reveal how women navigate these realities, balance multiple roles, and create their own paths. They reflect diverse experiences, highlighting both the obstacles women face and their resilience within the local context.

(National Management School)

STORY 1: Shaping a slower life with clay and intention

Monika Valkova

For the past eight years, Monika Valkova has been living in a small village in the region of Radomir, where life unfolds more slowly and quietly than in the city she once called home. Together with her husband and their three children, she made the decision to leave Sofia behind and begin a different kind of life, one closer to nature, to presence, and to themselves.

In this place, she has created a small centre, a peaceful space with a pottery workshop. It is simple, almost understated, yet deeply intentional. Her dream is not complicated. She wants people from the big cities, often overwhelmed and constantly in motion, to come here, pause,

and experience something they may have forgotten. Silence. Slowness. Calm. Just a little space to breathe and reconnect.

Her connection to pottery began instantly. The first time her hands touched clay, something settled inside her. It was not just inspiration, but recognition. Since then, working with clay has become a quiet relationship, something steady and deeply personal. Each piece she creates carries a part of her inner world, shaped not only by skill, but by feeling. For Monika, it has never been only about creating objects. It is about creating from the heart.

Leaving the city was one of the most meaningful decisions she has made. What once felt like distance from everything slowly revealed itself as closeness to what truly matters. In the quiet of village life, surrounded by nature and the rhythms of everyday simplicity, she found something that is difficult to explain but easy to feel. A sense of returning to oneself.

At the same time, she sees beauty in the movement between worlds. Today, people are constantly shifting between city and countryside, carrying pieces of both. For her, this exchange is important. It allows growth, perspective, and a deeper understanding of different ways of living.

In her local community, she has also noticed how easily women can hold themselves back, shaped by concerns about expectations and opinions. Yet she has seen how quickly this can begin to change. When women meet others from outside their usual circles, when they are exposed to new ways of thinking, something begins to open. They start to turn inward, to listen to themselves, to take small but meaningful steps.

And it always begins the same way.

With a decision.

A quiet moment when a woman says she will try, she will move forward, she will trust herself. From there, something shifts. And when women support each other in that process, encouraging, sharing, and simply being present, the impact grows.

Because Monika believes that women carry something powerful within them. A natural capacity for care, connection, and love. And when that love is allowed to exist freely, it has the power to transform not only their own lives, but the world around them.

In her small workshop, with clay turning slowly under her hands, she continues to offer that space. A place where things soften. Where people reconnect. Where something simple and gentle can quietly change everything.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 2: Creating space for dreams and connection

Snezhana Mitseva

In the small Bulgarian town of Radomir, where life moves at its own steady rhythm, there is a little space filled with colors, textures, and quiet courage. People call it “Арт Мястото”, The Art Place. But for those who know it well, it is something more. It is a story. And at the heart of that story stands Snezhana Mitseva.

She is 44 years old, a mother of two, and a woman who has learned how to hold many worlds at once. At home, she is simply a mother to a curious eight-year-old girl and a teenage boy already stepping into his own life. But when she unlocks the door of her studio in the morning, she steps into another role as a creator, a host, a dreamer, and a quiet builder of something meaningful.

The studio greets visitors like a gentle embrace. The scent of paper and paint lingers in the air, shelves display handmade treasures, and light falls softly on every carefully crafted detail. It is not just her work that lives here. Snezhana has opened the space to others, local artists and makers, mostly women, giving them a place to be seen. Slowly, almost without anyone noticing at first, the studio became more than a shop. It became a meeting point, a small network, a place where women found each other.

But this story did not begin here.

Years earlier, during the quiet and chaotic days of maternity leave with her second child, Snezhana found herself searching. Somewhere between caring for a baby and managing a home, she began attending workshops. At first, it was just curiosity. Then it became something deeper. She started learning techniques, experimenting with scrapbooking, mixed media, and textiles. Piece by piece, course by course, she invested in something she could not yet fully name.

Until one day, she simply knew. This was her path.

The decision was not easy. Turning passion into a livelihood rarely is. There were doubts, long nights, and the constant question of balance. Even now, years later, the work does not stay neatly within the walls of the studio. It follows her home, sits beside family dinners, and waits quietly when a child gets sick and everything else must pause.

Because in her world, like in the lives of many women around her, there is an unspoken expectation to be everything at once. A mother, a partner, a caretaker, a professional, and somewhere in between, to still remain herself.

What made her journey possible was not just determination, but support. Her husband, working from home, stands beside her not only in words but in action, sharing responsibilities, stepping in when needed, holding the other side of the balance. It is a quiet partnership, but one that makes all the difference.

Over time, Snezhana began to see that her studio was doing more than sustaining her own dream. It was creating space for others to dream too. Women from the region, each carrying their own stories, began to gather, sometimes to sell their work, sometimes just to connect. Ideas were exchanged, encouragement offered, and something fragile but powerful began to grow, a sense of community.

She knows that not every woman has the same opportunity. That talent alone is often not enough without support, time, or belief. And yet, she believes in the power of small steps, in shared stories, in showing quietly and consistently that another way is possible.

When she speaks about the future, her voice carries the same gentle determination that built her present. She dreams, not loudly, not dramatically, but steadily, of growing her studio, of continuing to create, of finding more women like her who are searching, hesitating, but ready.

Because in a small town like Radomir, it is easy to think that possibilities are limited. Snezhana does not argue with that. She simply proves, every day, that they are not.

And somewhere between paper, paint, and the hands that shape them, she keeps building not just art, but a quiet, living reminder that dreams, when held with enough care, can become a place where others feel at home too.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

STORY 3: Creating without waiting

Velika Prahova

In the quiet village of Dren village, surrounded by soft hills and a kind of silence that feels almost alive, there is a woman who never quite stands still. Her name is Velika Prahova, and if you ask her who she is, the answer will never be simple.

She is an artist, first and foremost. A sculptor by profession, someone who has shaped metal, space, and meaning with her hands. Later, she expanded her world into digital arts, adding new layers to her expression. But to define her only by her craft would be to miss something essential. Velika is movement, curiosity, and a constant reaching toward what is not yet there.

For years, she has moved between roles with ease and intensity. She has led creative workshops for children and adults, guiding others into their own expression. She has studied art therapy, exploring the quiet ways in which creation can heal. And today, her path has brought her to something deeply rooted in the community.

She lives and works in Dren, part of the Radomir municipality, where she has taken on the role of coordinator of DRENKO, a social enterprise within SOS Children's Villages Bulgaria. It is not just a job. It is a space where many of her worlds meet. Education, creativity, production, and human connection all exist side by side.

And yet, even here, there is no sense of arrival.

Velika has never been someone who settles easily. If something feels achievable, almost within reach, it loses its pull. Her mind instinctively moves further, toward the next challenge, the next idea, the next horizon. It is a force that drives her forward, almost like an inner engine that never switches off. It gives her strength, but it also asks something in return. There are moments when she wishes she could slow down, to rest in something simple and steady. But more often than not, she finds herself once again chasing something bigger.

Her journey, like the journeys of many women around her, has not always been understood. New ideas rarely are, especially in smaller communities. There are moments when what you

create feels unfamiliar to others, when people do not immediately see its value, when support is uncertain or slow to come.

But Velika has discovered something important.

When women come together around their ideas, something shifts.

In those moments, there is no need to explain everything. There is recognition. There is support that feels both practical and deeply human. Advice is shared, hands are extended, and sometimes all it takes is one voice saying that this phase will pass, that there is another way forward. In that shared space, ideas begin to breathe differently.

Her belief is simple, but not easy.

Do not wait.

Do not wait for perfect conditions, for approval, for certainty. Start. Bring your ideas to life, even if they feel fragile or incomplete. Because ideas, she believes, are not meant to stay inside. And when a woman creates something, it carries more than just personal meaning. It has the potential to open doors for others, to invite, to teach, to grow beyond itself.

Years earlier, this same spirit led Velika to leave the familiar and settle in Dren, drawn by a quiet desire to live closer to nature and to build something meaningful within a community. There, together with her partner, the musician Roko Zahariyev, she began shaping not just artworks, but a way of living. Their home became a space of creativity, shared with their son Martino and the simple, honest presence of everyday life.

Her artistic world has reached beyond the village as well. In Sofia, her sculptures have stepped into public space, her giants standing as quiet symbols of courage and imagination. These figures, strong yet human, reflect something of her own vision, a longing for a more beautiful and peaceful world.

Recognition followed, but it never became the goal. In 2022, she was named one of the inspiring women of the year in the Radomir region by Solidarity Works Foundation, a reflection of her contribution to cultural and community life. Those who nominated her described her as brave, active, talented, and just. A woman who does not only speak, but acts.

Still, when asked what she believes in, her answer turns elsewhere. To nature.

To the quiet certainty that when everything becomes unclear, it is always there, waiting. A place where she can lose herself and, given enough time, find herself again.

Her dreams are not loud, but they are persistent. She speaks of health, not only in the physical sense, but something deeper. A state where women have the time and space to return to themselves, to reconnect with their inner world, with their feminine nature. She admits this is something she is still learning, still searching for.

Because behind the strength, the ambition, and the constant motion, there is also a need for stillness. For gentleness. For that quiet, nurturing presence that so often gets lost in the rush to create and achieve.

And perhaps that is her most honest creation.

A life that is not perfectly balanced, but deeply lived. A path that does not promise ease, but offers meaning. A reminder that strength can be both fierce and soft at the same time.

And in the fields and studios of Dren, between sculpture and silence, Velika continues forward, not because the path is clear, but because she trusts the movement itself.

Explore this story online: [LINK]

Reflections and Key messages

This section brings together selected reflections from participants, partners, and stakeholders involved in the storytelling process.

Partner reflections:

- *"One of the most impactful elements was the sharing of personal stories, which demonstrated resilience and served as encouragement for other women. The experience confirmed that interactive approaches, such as dialogue and storytelling, have a stronger impact than traditional awareness-raising methods and should be further developed."* — Jovanka Runic, Ministry of Economy Affairs of Hercegbosnian Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- *Collecting and sharing women's personal stories has been one of the most meaningful parts of the WIN project. Each story brought a unique perspective, reminding us that behind every statistic, policy, or labour market challenge stands a real person with their own experiences, aspirations, and achievements. By giving women the opportunity to share their journeys, we not only made their voices more visible but also created a space for listening, reflection, inspiration, and mutual understanding. Looking back, these stories remind us of the strength,*

resilience, and diversity of women across our regions. Storytelling has shown us that personal experiences can build connections, encourage change, and bring important issues closer to the people and communities they affect. — Eva Korfová, LAG Sokolovsko, Czech Republic

- *"Collecting and sharing the WIN stories was much more than documenting women's experiences – it was a journey of discovering the values and entrepreneurial spirit of Loznica through the perspectives of women who create, lead and inspire every day. The WIN personal stories bring together women from different generations, professions and backgrounds – entrepreneurs, artists, tourism professionals, craftswomen, women leading companies and those from abroad who spent part of their lives in Loznica and experienced the city through their own unique perspectives. Although their businesses and interests differ, they are united by the same energy, determination to grow and willingness to embrace new opportunities. Their stories show that self-confidence is built step by step, through experience, persistence, mutual support and the courage to keep moving forward. In that sense, these women are not only successful individuals but also representatives of many others who are still finding and strengthening their place in the economic and social life of their communities. These stories naturally complement the gift catalogue "With Love from Loznica", developed within the WIN project to showcase authentic products and services created by women from this region. Together, the stories and the catalogue present a community where tradition meets innovation and every product, service and business carries the personal vision, creativity and determination of the woman behind it."* — Dragana Panajotović, Association of Business Women in Serbia, Serbia

- *"The personal stories, spread through the role model campaign, were one of the most powerful elements of our awareness raising activities. The portraits of women brought clear*

visibility to career paths that often remain hidden. The role models described the experience as empowering, the readers expressed high appreciation for the examples of women succeeding in industrial and technical sectors." — Gerfried Tiffner, VESTE, Austria

- *"What surprised me most was how modest the women were when talking about their own achievements. None of them presented themselves as exceptional, yet each story revealed remarkable resilience, difficult choices and a strong commitment to their families, careers and communities. We realised that storytelling is not about celebrating extraordinary people – it is about giving ordinary women the space to recognise that their everyday experiences can inspire others."* — Istvan Hegedűs, CTRIA, Hungary

Participant voices:

- *"Be brave and follow your own path! Many struggle with clichés and prejudices and don't dare to pursue typically male professions."* — Julia Vargek-Ipsa, Erzberg, Austria
- *"Do not be a servant, be a woman – create your own existence."* — Katalin Ádám, Hungary
- *"If I'm proud of anything, it's just that I didn't give up. I learned that there's always a way."* — Lucie Jejkalová
- *"When women support each other in that process — encouraging, sharing, and simply being present. The impact grows."* — Monika Valkova, Bulgaria
- *"When women come together around their ideas, something shifts. Do not wait for perfect conditions, for approval, for certainty. Start."* — Velika Prahova, Bulgaria
- *"The world is small. If your idea is good enough and original enough, someone, somewhere, will understand it."* — Marjeta Hribar, Slovenia

- *"Don't do everything yourself just to prove that you can. Accept help. There's no medal for exhausting yourself."* — Valentina Gazvoda, Slovenia

Key messages emerging across stories:

- Women's career paths are often non-linear and shaped by external constraints.
- Access to opportunities is strongly influenced by local context and available support systems.
- Personal resilience plays a significant role, but structural barriers remain.
- Community, networks, and mentorship are critical enablers.
- Stereotypes continue to influence career choices and opportunities.

About the WIN project

The WIN project, within which these stories were developed and shared, is co-financed by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund under the Interreg Danube Region Programme.

The project aims to improve the position of women in the labour market in peripheral industrial regions by addressing structural barriers, promoting inclusive opportunities, and supporting long-term change.

Conclusion

The stories gathered in this collection reveal that women's experiences in peripheral industrial regions cannot be reduced to simple narratives of success or failure. They are complex, often

shaped by a combination of personal ambition, structural limitations, and the realities of everyday life.

Across different regions, common patterns emerge. Limited job opportunities, strong gender norms, and unequal distribution of care responsibilities continue to influence women's choices and possibilities. At the same time, these stories show resilience, creativity, and the ability to adapt, even in environments that are not always supportive.

What becomes clear is that individual effort alone is not enough. While many women demonstrate determination and strength, their opportunities are still shaped by broader systems – from labour market structures to social expectations and available support networks. Recognising this is essential if we want to move beyond the idea that change depends solely on individual initiative.

At the same time, these stories highlight the importance of visibility. When women's experiences remain unheard, it becomes easier to overlook the barriers they face. By sharing these narratives, we create space for recognition, understanding, and dialogue. We also challenge simplified assumptions about what women's lives and careers look like in these regions.

These stories are not meant to provide definitive answers. Instead, they invite reflection. They encourage us to ask what conditions are needed for women to thrive, what needs to change in local environments, and how support systems can be strengthened.

Ultimately, the value of these stories lies in their ability to connect personal experience with broader realities. They remind us that behind every statistic, there are individual lives shaped by choices, constraints, and possibilities – and that meaningful change begins with listening.