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Input paper on the position of women in the labour markets of peripheral industrial regions

WIN

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

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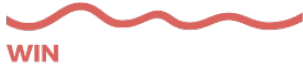
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1. Introduction

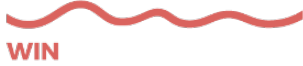
This input paper provides a basic overview of the conceptual and practical knowledge about the main topic of the WIN project, the position of female workers in peripheral industrial regions with a special focus on the Danube Region. It aims to enable a common understanding among project partners (PPs), associated partners (ASPs) and other target groups.

The Danube Region is an area with above-average gender inequalities in the employment sector. Unemployed women outnumber unemployed men, especially in highly industrialised peripheral regions ([Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives, 2019](#)). Traditionally, economic activities in such regions are concentrated in mining, manufacturing and engineering, which have been predominantly male-dominated. Those traditional norms continue to shape narrow labour markets, which can reinforce gender stereotypes (e.g. men occupy high-skilled jobs, while women work in low-skilled jobs). The recent COVID-19 crisis exposed and even exacerbated the issue of gender inequality in labour markets through the sudden increase in women's unpaid care work. The manifested problem of gender inequality and the resulting vulnerability of women in finding adequate and well-paying jobs appears to be a persistent and intractable challenge that has not yet been effectively addressed by any country in the Danube Region.



The WIN project aims to open up new employment opportunities for all women in the Danube Region and remove cultural and institutional barriers that prevent women from realising their professional potential. The expected impact is to bring about positive change in terms of 1) a better understanding of women's specific needs and skills gaps on the one hand and cultural and institutional barriers on the other, which together contribute to gender inequality; 2) empowering women with the necessary tools and opportunities to increase their professional potential; 3) improving the socio-economic development of peripheral industrial regions throughout the Danube Region; and 4) encouraging more effective policy-making at different spatial levels that can adopt more inclusive measures and practices, bringing down institutional barriers.

To meet these goals, the WIN project targets women as a vulnerable group at risk of exclusion from the labour markets of small- and medium-sized industrial towns and regions with a bad reputation as 'places that don't matter' or 'left-behind' places, often characterised by economic decline and out-migration. National governments often rely on spatially blind measures of European cohesion funds. The WIN project tries to improve macro-regional policy frameworks and mechanisms to bridge this gap by addressing the place-specific challenges of peripheral industrial regions through people-centred solutions and strategies. The project aims to implement seven pilot actions in different peripheral industrial regions by developing, testing and reflecting the overarching concept of social innovation, while enabling regional diversification.

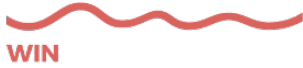


Within this input paper, the scope of all other project activities is set, and a joint understanding of the basic historical and contemporary issues in regard to female labour markets, barriers and challenges, as well as empowerment strategies, is laid out. The aim is to create a comprehensive but easy-to-read access point to the project topic for a larger audience of interested stakeholders.

2. Framing the Role of Women in the Labour Markets of Industrial Regions

2.1 Women and Industrialisation

Generally, women's roles in labour markets have been linked to different stages of economic development, **with the share of labour market participation highly layered by economic sectors and industries** (see Figure 1). For manufacturing, in the early stages of industrialisation, labour-intensive goods were produced comparatively cheaply by female labourers due to occupational segregation and large gender wage gaps. Factories were often located in peripheral settings due to the closeness of raw materials, often constituting the only regional employer. More advanced stages of industrialisation are marked by a substantial, both technological- and capital-intensive, upgrading of production, which usually results in a declining female share of employment in the industrial sector. These employment losses are compensated by **increasing shares of female employment in services** ([Sorgener, 2021](#)), a sector that



today sees the highest share of female workers, where the rate across Europe is 63.2% ([Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023](#)). Here, women workers are especially represented in **care-related occupations**, which are traditionally lower-paid sectors. In the era of digitalisation, encompassing a value shift to high-tech sectors, females again face disadvantaged labour market positions. This is reflected by their minor share of 22% in tech roles across European companies ([Blumberg et al., 2023](#)), as the science, technology, engineering and mathematical fields (STEM) are usually higher-paid sectors ([Pal et al., 2024](#)).

93% vs 2.9% female childcare workers and teachers vs female machinery mechanics and repairs ([EUROSTAT, 2024](#))

In Europe, increased female participation in the labour market has been especially evident since the Second World War. Since the 1980s, employment numbers have increased from 40% to 80% in the 25–54 age group. Nevertheless, significant differences exist between the country level and economic sectors, which are **not only linked to economic factors but also to the social embeddedness** of gender roles and stereotypes.

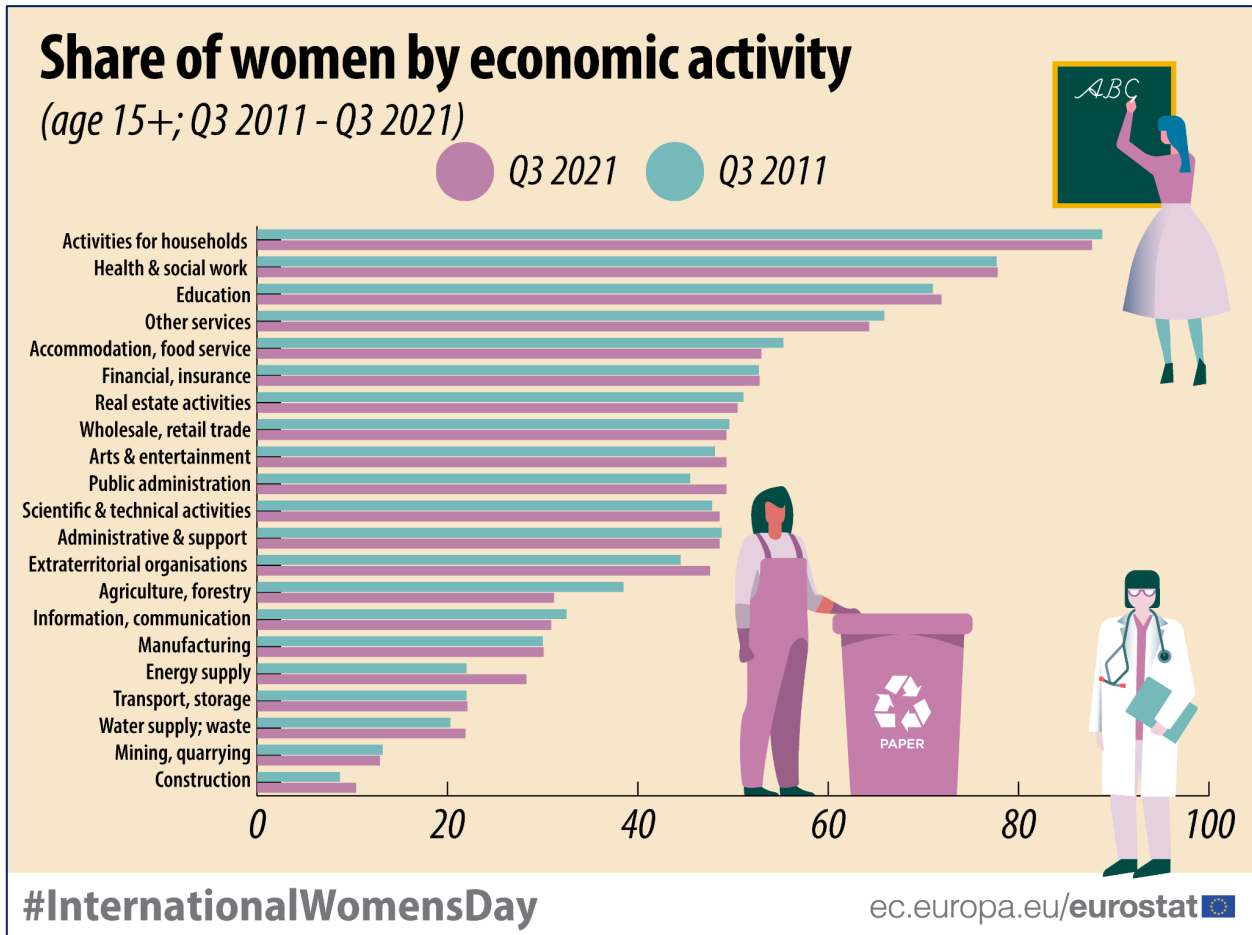
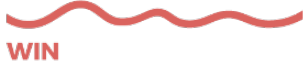


Figure 1: Jobs with the highest share of women in Q3 2021 ([EUROSTAT, 2022](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat))

The gender gap, which describes *'the unequal outcomes achieved by women and men on the labour market, as well as women's restricted access to rights and assets worldwide'* ([European Institute of Gender Equality, 2017](https://www.eige.europa.eu/gender-equality)), is an economic and social challenge. These unequal outcomes are also connected to elements such as working conditions, access to rights and assets and the overall possibility of economic independence



([European Institute of Gender Equality, 2017](#)). For instance, while **childcare's negative impacts on female labour participation have decreased, care work for the elderly still constitutes a barrier** ([Christiansen et al., 2016](#)). This underlines the need to understand that **equality at work goes hand-in-hand with equality in society**. While Central and Eastern Europe score well above the global average in gender parity progress (MGI Gender Parity Score), these regions still **lag behind in comparison with Western Europe and especially the Nordic countries** ([Christiansen et al., 2016](#)), where countries like Iceland, Norway and Finland have the highest gender equality worldwide ([Pal et al., 2024](#)). Especially for those regions that face prevailing gender roles and female care and service work, gender equality constitutes an even bigger challenge, which was **found to be more evident in society than at work in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries** ([Iszkowska et al., 2021](#)). For example, in CEE overall, more women than men graduate from university, but females still work more often in part-time and lower-paying jobs. **Overall, sectoral and occupational segregation by gender has declined only marginally in Europe** despite an increase in female labour force participation ([EIGE, 2017](#)), thereby still constituting a persisting challenge and an untapped potential ([OECD, 2023](#)).

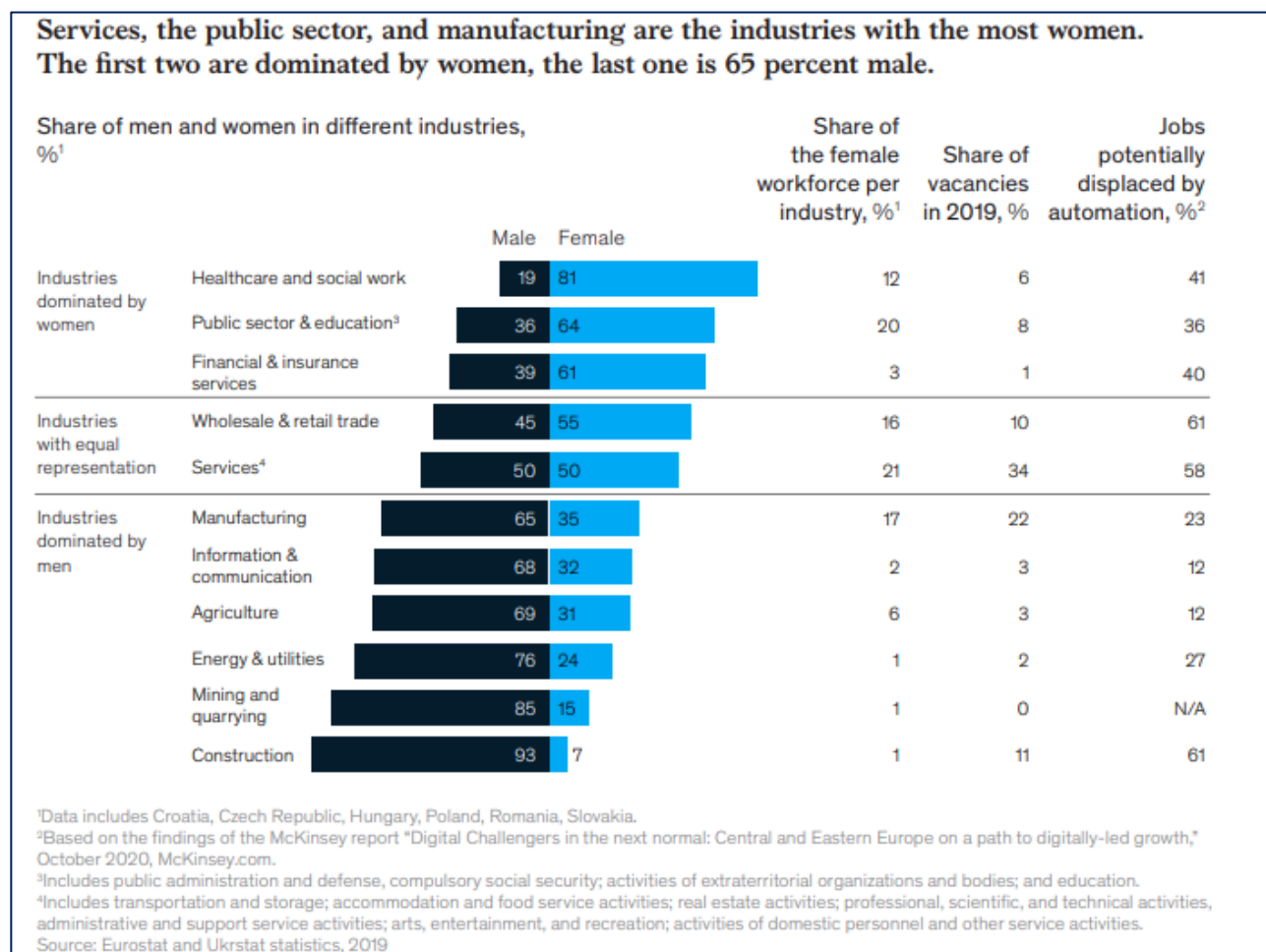


Figure 2: Share of men and women in different industries in selected countries ([Iszkowska et al., 2021, p.20](#)).

2.2 Women in the Danube Region

The Danube Region is acknowledged as a very diverse region in terms of economic performance, but one of the shared territorial challenges is the disadvantaged position of women in labour markets. Statistical data show that gender inequality is a real problem when employment levels are considered ([CESCI, 2019](#)). In **every country of the Danube Region, the employment rate of women is lower than that of men**. The recent COVID-19 crisis has exposed and even exacerbated the problem of gender inequality in labour markets through the sudden increase in women's unpaid care work.

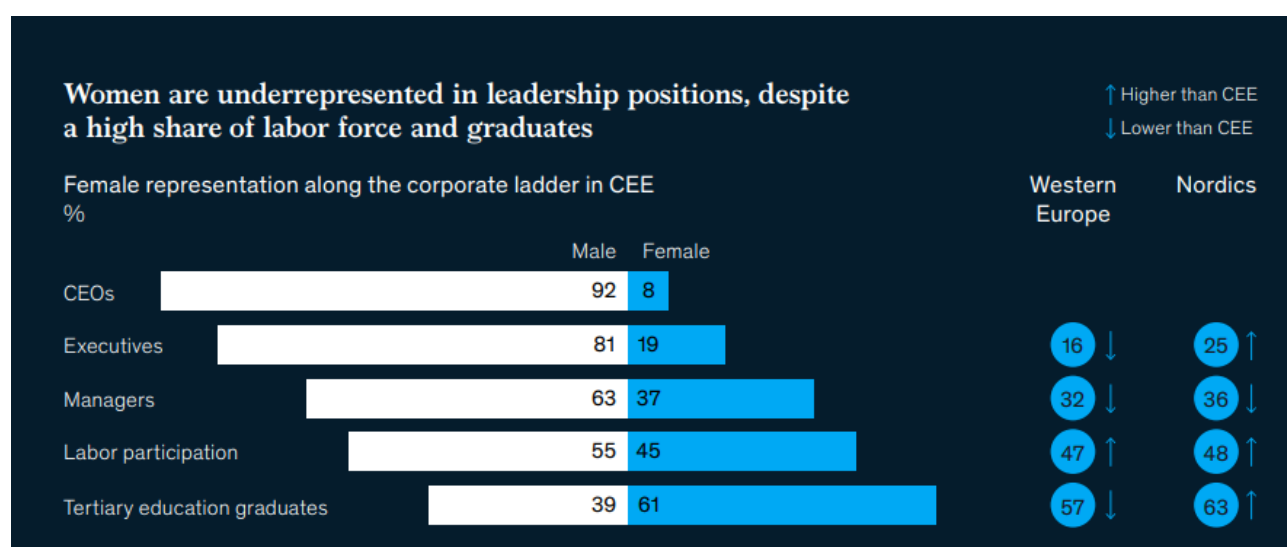
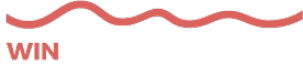


Figure 3: Women in leadership positions in selected CEE countries ([Iszkowska et al., 2021, p.13](#))

While men's employment levels tend to converge, there is a significant gender gap in many countries. In the Czech Republic (14.2%), Hungary (14%), Slovakia (12.7%),



Romania (17%), Serbia (13.7%) and Montenegro (12.6%), the gap is still significant compared to the EU average (10.5%). According to these statistics, unemployed women outnumber unemployed men, especially in the highly industrialised regions of Czechia, western Slovakia and western Hungary in particular.

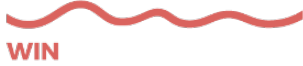
On small- and medium-sized peripheral industrial towns

The industrial town may seem to be an obsolete urban structure that has vanished from the political agenda with numerous studies on the negative impact of deindustrialisation and urban decline. Therefore, traditional industrial towns are seen as facing problematic futures, as a higher proportion of employment in industrial activities is associated with weaker job growth and higher unemployment rates compared to towns with more jobs in the service sector ([Servillo et al., 2017](#)). However, some studies from Europe suggest that while deindustrialisation has been particularly noticeable in larger metropolitan cities, smaller towns still retain a significant share of the economic base in the industrial sector ([Koceva et al., 2016](#)). Some authors also argue that certain types of industrial towns have proved to be economically successful and innovative ([Bole et al., 2019](#)) and more resilient in the recent economic crisis ([Hoekstra, 2017](#)).

Overall, industrial towns remain important in Europe and especially in the Danube Region, where on average, manufacturing employment is significantly higher than across OECD economies ([OECD, 2019](#)), with visible signs of re-industrialisations. Hereby, the most recent OECD report (2023) underlines the importance of manufacturing in rural areas, where in 2019, **one in five jobs could be attributed to manufacturing**. Furthermore, it claims that rural regions in Central Europe even outperform other densely populated regions in their country. Furthermore, they not only play an important role as economic **producers of various goods but also as places of vibrant industrial heritage, culture and values** ([OECD, 2023](#)).



Peripheral industrial regions in the Danube Region represent a unique environment in terms of gender inequality. They are characterised by a specific economic base and occupational profiles, where women typically fall into the category of a 'group at risk of exclusion'. Economic activities in peripheral industrial regions are traditionally concentrated in the mining, manufacturing and technology sectors, which have been predominantly male-dominated. **These traditional norms continue to shape narrow labor markets, reinforcing gender stereotypes where men occupy high-skilled jobs while women work in low-skilled jobs.** While historically, especially in socialist countries, women's employment in industries existed on a larger scale ('women's factories'), these employment opportunities mainly have reinforced the gender skill divide, leading, with the outsourcing or technological upgrading of production, to a high rate of job losses for women. Employment support systems in the form of education, training programmes and career planning also predominantly favour a culture of traditional industrial masculinity. In extreme cases, the stereotypical neglect of women in the design of labour markets leads to the creation of a male-dominated workforce ([EU Strategy for Danube Region \(EUSDR\), 2019](#)). **Women are therefore hindered from participating in local and regional labour markets, especially in the industrial and technological sectors.** Particularly in industrial areas, the lack of jobs in nontechnological sectors, where women are otherwise more likely to be educated, further prevents them from engaging economically. Additionally, in peripheral regions, the marginally developed service sector offers few other well-paid employment opportunities. For these reasons, women often end up in precarious employment

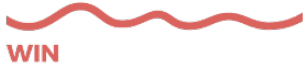


without being able to plan a professional career in the region. Such scenarios inevitably lead to a higher unemployment rate among women and force them to commute to larger regional centres or emigrate (e.g. brain drain), triggering negative demographic development in these regions ([Kröhnert & Vollmer, 2012](#)). The persistent barriers to employment opportunities that women face have significant negative impacts on their empowerment and well-being, as working women are more likely to play a bigger role in household decision-making compared to non-working women in the same communities or even in the same families. **Peripheral industrial regions thus lose important drivers for future economic, social and demographic development.** Directly and indirectly, lower women's participation in local and regional labour markets means a major loss of potential productivity, economic diversification and social cohesion. **The untapped creative potential of the female labour force might lead to a further marginalisation of peripheral industrial regions and intensification of the core-periphery divide in all countries of the Danube Region.**

The WIN project thereby aims to pursue an inclusive approach by targeting all kinds of women. Accordingly, the groups may vary by age, profession, background, abilities and education, just to name a few. However, following ethical codes and the assurance of not being exclusive, the project will not try to classify these groups. Rather, the target groups mentioned in the application form will form the basis for further analysis. These groups encompass the following:



- Austria: Women (with a focus on the age group 15–65); additional focus on the niche group ‘migrant women’
- Bosnia-Herzegovina: Unemployed women; women with disabilities, regardless of age, education level and previous working experience
- Bulgaria: Young and adult women, aged 18–45, economically inactive or underpaid
- Czech Republic: Highly educated women; middle-aged women, facing various problems (social, economic, family vs. work . . .); adolescents aged about 15 in primary school
- Hungary: Young women in the period of motherhood; women over 55, close to retirement
- Serbia: Younger women and girls who want to learn about digital marketing; older women who make homemade products and have weak access to the market
- Slovenia: Young women aged 16–29 who are unemployed, have difficulties finding a job, need (re)qualification and tend to emigrate to larger centres

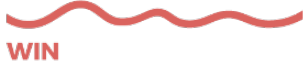


2.3 European Policies targeting Women's Employment Opportunities

Achieving greater gender equality and empowering women are among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality aims at women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities in economic life and undertakes reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources.

Sustainable development goal number five aims at **achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls**. It encompasses nine targets, of which the following are relevant in this context:

- Ending all forms of discrimination and eliminating all forms of violence and harmful practices
- Valuing unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility
- Ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership



- Enhancing the use of enabling technology to promote the empowerment of women
- Adopting policies and legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls ([United Nations, 2024](#))

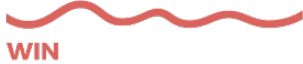
At the European level, the UN's aims have been mirrored by the EU Gender Equality Strategy since 2020. The Strategy presents policy objectives and actions to make significant progress by 2025 **towards a gender-equal Europe** ([Baiocco et al., 2020](#)). The goal is a Union in which women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are **free** to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to **thrive** and can equally **participate** in and **lead** our European society. The current EU budget (2021–27) also fosters gender equality-related projects, which will be supported and funded through various EU programmes, ranging from dedicated grants under the Citizens, Rights, Equality and Values programmes to large structural, cohesive and social funds.

The **key objectives** are ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing gender pay and pension gaps; and closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and politics. The Strategy pursues a dual approach of gender **mainstreaming** combined with targeted actions, and **intersectionality** is a horizontal principle for its implementation. While the Strategy focuses on actions within the EU, it is coherent with the EU's external policy on gender equality and women's empowerment.



As one of the first deliverables of the Strategy, the European Commission proposed [binding pay transparency measures](#) on 4 March 2021. The [Pay Transparency Directive](#) was adopted in May 2023. The new rules will help ensure that the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value, enshrined in the treaty since 1957, finally becomes a reality on the ground (EU Commission, 2020). Most European countries have devised national gender strategies based on the aims of the European Gender Equality Strategy.

Against this background, the [EU Danube Strategy](#) also aims to make a positive contribution to reducing vulnerabilities and inequalities for women. In the network of the European Social Fund Managing Authorities in the Danube Region, Priority Area 9 ('People and Skills') and Priority Area 10 ('Institutional Capacity') are actively seeking better cooperation for social innovations and measures to support women's access to the labour market. Likewise, Priority Area 8 ('Competitiveness') commits to strengthening the entrepreneurial skills of women. In this way, women in the Danube Region should acquire the skill set and opportunities to realise ideas and solutions for sustainable development. Inspired by PA8, the Policy Paper on Female Entrepreneurship in the Danube Region notes that women are underrepresented in entrepreneurship relative to men due to institutional and market failures that make it difficult for women entrepreneurs to access resources (e.g. financing, skills). The policy paper concludes that various stakeholders need to combine their efforts and create a



positive environment for the growth of female (self-)employment to improve the current situation ([EIGE, 2017](#)).

3. Glass Ceilings or Labyrinths – Women’s Challenges on Peripheral Industrial Labour Markets

Very little academic knowledge exists about the specific roles of women in industrial labour markets and their challenges in peripheral industrial regions. To gain a better understanding of the most common challenges women face in such settings, the following chapter will offer some insight by referring to the existing strands of literature, along the topics of women’s barriers in the industrial sector in general (3.1), place-based barriers in industrial regions (3.2), as well as general barriers in women’s employment and empowerment (3.3).

‘... it is needed to change traditional gender roles, despite the fact that their change or elimination is always related to the change of collective beliefs and that is a result of collective actions determining qualitative changes of the entire social life.’

([Kiaušienė et al., 2011, p. 84](#))

3.1 Barriers in Industrial Sectors

One of the most common barriers women face in industrial sectors, according to NACE B-C, (E), (F) (for classification, see [NACE Rev.2](#)), is a predominantly **masculine work**



culture. Especially in male-dominant professions (e.g. natural resource extraction), women struggle, as they feel they have to 'outperform' men to fit in, being closely watched as well as generally marginalised. Additionally, it was found, especially outside office settings, that sexual harassment, mocking or isolation are frequent ([Baruah & Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2021](#)). As a response, women often avoid professions with a higher probability of discrimination and stereotyping ([Schwanke, 2013](#)). Furthermore, the **absence of female mentorships and role models** constitutes a barrier ([Coleman, 2020](#)), often **interconnected with a lack of awareness of the range of job opportunities** in industrial sectors ([Baruah & Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2021](#)). This results in limited **access to professional and personal networks for women, who often face an 'old boys' club'** ([Schwanke, 2013](#); [Bole et al., 2024](#)), which can be considered essential for career information and job offers ([Baruah & Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2021](#)). Networking between women can therefore be seen as necessary to access contacts.

Historically, training for a blue-collar job was mainly targeted at and reserved for men ([Sutton et al., 2016](#)), resulting in highly gendered hierarchies in the industrial sectors, with distinct divisions between (male) top-level workers and a (female) low-skilled workforce. Even today, it has been found that, in blue-collar job-prevalent communities, school and high school training curriculums disproportionately penalise women ([Sutton et al., 2016](#)). Furthermore, in the high-tech sector, women do not necessarily profit equally from technological upgrading ([McKay, 2006](#)). With the current high demand in STEM fields, women face additional access barriers, as there is still a high supply of



skilled women in the social sciences and humanities, with lesser market demand – laying bare the less-than-favourable conditions for the evolution of work for females.

3.2 Place-based Barriers

The periphery is often defined through its urban counterpart, with infrastructural deficits (e.g. in childcare provision) and limited access to often narrow and specialised labour markets. In many industrial regions, industrial culture is a unique and strong feature. Through everyday social practices, values and traditions, it forms communities, social cohesion and a strong sense of belonging ([Areschoug, 2019](#); [Zenker et al., 2017](#)). Herein, women's social functions for the family and in passing on cultural identities play an important role. Accordingly, such areas are often characterised by traditional gender roles, whereby women are expected to take care of their home-based responsibilities, impacting their possible work-distance radius and laying bare the **barriers of unpaid care work and childcare**. An exception in this context are socialist 'women's factories', especially of the textile industry, which have been historically important for the Danube Region. Here, a female workforce dominated an industry associated with modernity and the emancipation of rural women ([Vodopivec, 2012](#)).

44% of Europeans see women's most important role as taking care of family and home ([European Commission, 2020](#)).

Overall, industrial places often enforce gender stereotypes, such as men being considered to do a 'better job', limiting women's labour market participation, for



example, in regard to entrepreneurship. Such limitations can constitute an additional **push factor** for **outmigration, which is a highly gendered** challenge in peripheral regions. The reasons young women outmigrate are complex and cross-sectoral, but a narrow job market, the industry's negative image, a gender-biased 'industrial culture', as well as unattractive industrial townscapes and a less-diverse infrastructure can be identified as some of the push factors (Harfst et al., forthcoming). Accordingly, the recognition of and contest against gender bias in society and education is vital to fostering inclusive environments. Additionally, there are barriers in the form of **'reactive' local policies**, lacking embeddedness in societal structures and therefore reproducing inequalities ([Baruah & Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2021](#)). Often space-blind, these policies neglect **social infrastructures**, which encompass tangible (schools, parks, etc.) and intangible assets (networks, organisations, etc.), whereby a community's identity is expressed and which play an important role for 'left behind places', to which peripheral industrial regions can be added ([Tomaney et al., 2023](#)).

3.3 Barriers to Employment and Empowerment

On a more general level, female employment is hampered in different dimensions, regardless of the economic sector or territorial setting. While female employment shares have risen constantly in recent decades, even today, women are still assumed to take on a greater share of domestic responsibilities. **While technology may have encouraged workers' flexibility and independence from urban centres, it has not reduced workload hours overall** ([Coleman, 2020](#)). Therefore, while female labour

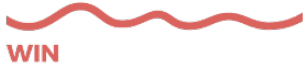


participation has increased, their **responsibilities at home have seen only comparatively minor decreases** ([Schwanke, 2013](#)).

At the workplace level, female labour market participation is often hampered by **informal selection and promotion processes** ([Cross & Linehan, 2006](#)), as women are less often informed about job offers than their male counterparts. This **lack of transparency and accountability** goes hand-in-hand with the fact that women are more likely to reply to a job offer only if they meet all the requirements, which is not the case with men, pointing to a **lack of self-esteem and training opportunities**. Also, **funding** is another barrier, as venture capitalists and private equity lenders have shown persistent prejudice regarding women's leadership qualifications and company commitments, hampering access to capital despite the education and experience of women ([Winn, 2005](#)).

7.7% of CEOs are female, and women's pensions are **30.1%** lower than men's ([European Commission, 2020](#))

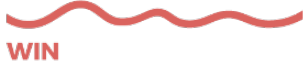
Research shows a '*. . . disconnection between company rhetoric about recruiting and retaining women and the reality of entrenched male preference*' ([Baruah & Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2021, p. 194](#)). Sometimes, the **share of women in a company is used as a 'token'**, whereby female workforce numbers are considered legitimate and valuable and equate to gender equality. This comes despite a persisting gender pay gap; on the European scale, women's hourly **earnings were 12.7% below those of men** ([Eurostat](#),



[2024](#)), varying significantly between nations as well as the private (higher gap) or public sectors.

When it comes to empowerment strategies in economic terms, industry greatly emphasises women's potential in new, innovative and different ways of thinking, which overall results in increased profits. There are many strategic papers and best practices that provide advice for companies and governments, which, on the one hand, centre around increased **accessibility, visibility, promotion and mentoring, and on the other, on research, education and STEM, as well as incentives and support for programmers**. However, it is important to note that 'real' empowerment goes beyond the workplace:

'However, over the past century, the concept of uplifting women has turned into a multi-million-dollar industry' ([Robinson, 2024](#)).



4. How to Improve Women's Position in Industrial Labour Markets

Women's increased labour market participation is expected to promote economic competitiveness and gross domestic product (GDP) growth (Woman in Manufacturing – Back to the future; white paper). Especially in peripheral or rural regions, women or female innovators are seen as important in fostering the balance between social, economic and environmental development, thereby ensuring the regions' vitality ([Ní Fhlatharta & Farrell, 2017](#)).

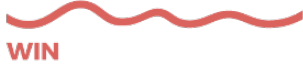
When discussing how to improve women's positions in industrial labour markets, we have to bear in mind that the **challenges stretch far beyond labour participation and improving workplace conditions**. As stated before, inequalities are deeply rooted in societies, **requiring empowering strategies beyond the workplace**, such as through politics (among other social infrastructure provision) and society (among other networking and cultural activities) by increasing women's participation and power. This could foster a process to build greater confidence and self-esteem. Existing studies, especially strategic policy documents, often misemphasise, stressing only the importance of and interrelation between economic development and female empowerment ([Duflo, 2012](#)).

Barriers can arise from many dimensions, but female labour market participation can also be tackled (see Fig. 3). These can include actions that lead to reflection on and

change of gender stereotypes and industrial cultures (identity + education), which should already be implemented early on (addressing school education of boys and girls), better provision of skills and training, including entrepreneurship (education + finance), the upgrading of social infrastructures (kindergarten, care), and the provision of flexible working arrangements (political processes). These aspects **require actions from different stakeholders on company and administrative levels, but also – and perhaps most importantly – on a societal level in general**. Different strategic actions in various policy fields, requiring different stakeholders, are necessary to improve overall female labour market access.

Key action area	Identity	Political processes	Education	Labour	Finance
Challenges	Identity and the workplace	Women's exclusion from decision-making	Gender stereotyping	Increased unemployment	Gender pay gap
	The double burden of work and care	Lack of inclusive scheduling	Shortage of women in STEM	Gender employment gap	Low levels of female entrepreneurship
Strategies	Redefine identity in a community	Build on grassroots movement	Dismantle gender stereotyping	Branch out from carbon-intensive sectors	Introduce green and gender-just budgeting and taxation
	Introduce participatory budgeting	Involve trade unions	Focus on gender-transformative upskilling and reskilling	Improve conditions in the care sector	Activate inclusive entrepreneurship
		Analyse the local context		Improve representation	

Figure 4: Overview of identified action areas and related challenges and strategies for JTF (Just Transition Fund regions ([European Commission, 2023](#)))



In this context, it is important to underline that **real empowerment should not only aim to improve women's access to resources; it should also address women's views of themselves and as citizens and human beings in general** ([Cornwall, 2016](#)). Furthermore, *'Feminists have long argued that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women'* (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356) and therefore, it is vital to create consciousness of one's own possibilities, critically reflect on the social spheres of existing obstacles and recognise the female power within when acting together as a group, leading to the ability to act as agents against inequalities ([Cornwall, 2016](#)). Hereby, *'...a process that engages women in thinking differently—about themselves, about the situations they are in, about their social worlds, relationships and horizons'* (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356) is needed. In this context studies have shown the **importance of organising collectives and initiatives from the bottom up**, thereby fostering positive change ([Htun & Weldon, 2010](#)).

Therefore, the WIN project will address these problems of female labour market participation not only by providing policy advice but also via concrete social innovation processes co-created with women, enabling real, long-lasting initiatives and change within the participating regions. A methodological toolkit that ensures step-by-step guidance to develop, test and reflect on social innovations will be presented and updated with real experiences from the pilot actions.

'Rather than simply providing support or opportunities, activation aims to engage, mobilize and propel women into positions of influence and leadership. It emphasizes creating an environment where women are not just passive recipients of empowerment efforts but are actively involved in decision-making and innovation' ([Robinson, 2024](#)).

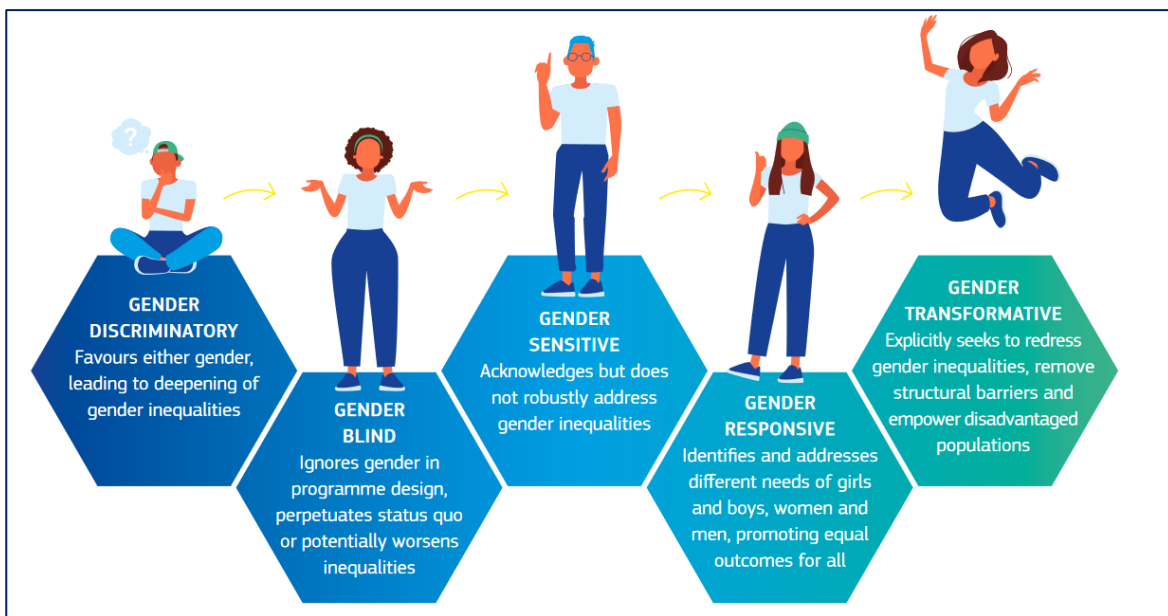


Figure 5: The gender integration continuum ([European Commission, 2023, p.23 according to UNICEF, 2022](#))

In the WIN project context, this is done by increasing institutional capacity building (see SO3) through targeted awareness-raising campaigns. This will help raise awareness among stakeholders at different spatial levels by promoting women's professional competences and skills and addressing cultural and institutional barriers that have led



to gender inequality, such as gender stereotypes and expectations based on fixed norms for men and women that limit their aspirations, choices and freedom.

In a further step, by providing targeted recommendations, policymakers, employers and employment support bodies can adopt more inclusive policies and practices, bringing down institutional barriers. These policy changes will create an enabling environment that supports women's empowerment, addresses gender inequalities and provides more accessible and inclusive employment opportunities for them in peripheral industrial regions. To ensure a bottom-up approach, there will be joint development, testing and reflecting on social innovations as solutions for more accessible, inclusive and effective labour markets for women. The focus thus is on women's networks, training and skills development, business incubators, self-confidence building, entrepreneurial skills, digital education and career guidance, which will provide women with the necessary tools and opportunities to enhance their professional potential.

TAKEAWAY MESSAGES

EQUALITY AT WORK GOES HAND-IN-HAND WITH EQUALITY IN SOCIETY

Especially in peripheral regions with persistent traditional gender roles and stereotypes, women are expected to take care of their families. As a result, they face unpaid care work and additional hours. Overall, they work more - so let's talk about the downsides of flexible working hours.



EMPOWERMENT IS MORE THAN JUST PROVIDING ACCESS



Real empowerment should not only aim just to improve women's access to resources; it should also address women's self-views and therefore gender, as well as citizens and human beings in general. We require empowering strategies beyond the workplace!

MASCULINE INDUSTRIAL CULTURE AS A BARRIER

Women face a higher probability of discrimination, sexual harassment and stereotypes in male-dominant industries and the absence of female mentorships and role models. Moreover, confronted with no access to the 'old boys' club', they are excluded from career opportunities and networks.



FOSTER BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES



It is important to organise collectives and initiatives from the bottom up to support each other and foster positive change, thereby fostering self-esteem and self-image.

WHAT WE NEED

- Elimination of the use of the share of women in companies as a 'token'.
- An increase in women's participation in higher-paid jobs (STEM).
- Gender mainstreaming as a policy approach.
- Tackling the barriers of unpaid care work and childcare.
- Active and place-sensitive local policies and social infrastructure.



THE UNTAPPED CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE FEMALE LABOUR FORCE INEVITABLY LEADS TO A FURTHER MARGINALISATION OF PERIPHERAL INDUSTRIAL REGIONS AND INTENSIFICATION OF THE CORE-PERIPHERY DIVIDE IN ALL COUNTRIES OF THE DANUBE REGION. LET'S TACKLE IT!



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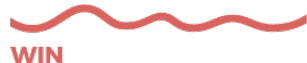
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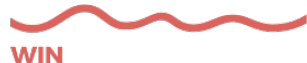
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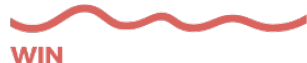
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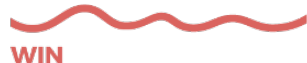
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