

WIN Policy Brief Series

Connecting Gender Equality, Skills, Competitiveness, and Governance in Danube Industrial Regions

Prepared by:

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Introduction

Industrial regions across the Danube Region are undergoing profound economic, demographic, and technological transformation. Digitalisation, the green transition, population ageing, and persistent skills shortages are reshaping regional labour markets while increasing demand for a qualified, adaptable, and diverse workforce. At the same time, women continue to face structural barriers to labour market participation, career progression, entrepreneurship, and leadership, particularly in industrial and peripheral regions where employment opportunities are often limited and strongly influenced by traditional gender norms.

The WIN – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions project has addressed these challenges by examining how gender inequalities interact with regional labour market structures, education and skills systems, enterprise development, and governance arrangements. Drawing on transnational research, regional case studies, stakeholder engagement, pilot actions, and the exchange of good practices across the Danube Region, WIN identifies practical approaches to strengthening women's participation in industrial labour markets and supporting more inclusive, resilient, and competitive regional development.

A central finding of the project is that gender inequalities in labour market outcomes do not result from a single policy gap. Rather, they emerge from the interaction between skills systems, labour market structures, enterprise practices, governance capacities, and the broader institutional and social environment. Consequently, effective responses require coordinated action across multiple governance levels and policy domains.

To support this process, the WIN project has developed a series of five complementary policy briefs, each addressing a specific governance level or policy audience while contributing to a shared objective: improving women's labour market participation and strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of industrial regions across the Danube Region.

The Policy Brief Series

The series comprises five interconnected policy briefs:

- EUSDR PA08 – Competitiveness of Enterprises: *Connecting Competitiveness and Gender Equality in Danube Industrial Regions* explores how enterprise competitiveness, innovation ecosystems, entrepreneurship, and gender-responsive workforce development can strengthen regional competitiveness while improving women's participation in industrial labour markets.
- EUSDR PA09 – People & Skills: *Connecting Skills, Labour Market Access and Gender Equality in Danube Industrial Regions* focuses on the links between education and training systems, labour market access, social inclusion, and territorial development to support more inclusive and resilient regional labour markets.
- EUSDR PA10 – Institutional Capacities & Cooperation: *Connecting Governance, Participation & Gender in Danube Industrial Regions* examines how institutional capacity, multi-level governance, stakeholder participation, and transnational cooperation can improve the implementation and sustainability of gender-responsive labour market policies.
- Local and Regional Stakeholders: *Unlocking Female Employment in Industrial Regions* provides practical implementation pathways for municipalities, regional authorities, public employment services, education providers, businesses, civil society organisations, and other regional actors responsible for delivering inclusive labour market measures on the ground.
- National Stakeholders: *Supporting Female Employment in Industrial Regions* identifies policy frameworks and enabling conditions that support the transfer, scaling, and long-term sustainability of successful regional approaches through national legislation, strategies, and investment.

Together, these briefs demonstrate that inclusive labour markets depend on complementary action across governance levels. While local and regional stakeholders implement practical solutions and national authorities provide enabling frameworks, the EUSDR Priority Areas facilitate strategic coordination, transnational cooperation, and policy learning across the Danube Region.

How to Read this Series

Although each brief can be read independently, they are designed as complementary components of an integrated policy framework.

The three EUSDR Priority Area briefs focus on strategic policy coordination from the perspectives of competitiveness (PA08), people and skills (PA09), and institutional capacities and cooperation (PA10). The remaining two briefs translate these strategic perspectives into recommendations for national, regional and local stakeholders, recognising their complementary roles in creating enabling conditions and implementing effective labour market measures.

Taken together, the five briefs promote an integrated approach to gender-equal labour markets that combines enterprise competitiveness, skills development, effective governance, and place-based implementation.

About the Recommendations

The recommendations presented in this policy brief series are derived from the research findings, stakeholder engagement, and pilot activities of the WIN – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions project. They are intended to support policy dialogue, mutual learning, and evidence-informed policymaking within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR).

The policy briefs do not constitute official policy positions or policy documents of the EUSDR Priority Areas or their Priority Area Coordinators. They represent recommendations developed by the WIN project consortium based on project evidence, stakeholder consultation, and transnational cooperation.

Connecting Competitiveness and Gender Equality in Danube Industrial Regions

WIN Policy Brief addressing EUSDR PA08 – Competitiveness of Enterprises

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

KEY MESSAGE

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

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

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

These conditions are influenced across governance levels. While barriers are experienced locally and enabling frameworks are set nationally, EUSDR PA08 contributes to more gender-equal enterprise development by advocating for gender-sensitive approaches in skills, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness policies across the Danube Region.

1. WHY THIS MATTERS

The WIN project (“Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions”) has addressed persistent gender gaps in employment across industrial towns and peripheral industrial regions in the Danube area. These regions are characterised by structural challenges, including limited labour market diversification, demographic pressures, skills shortages, and gender norms shaping education and career pathways.

Across the WIN pilot regions, gender gaps remain visible—particularly in STEM, R&D, and entrepreneurship—although in some cases, industrial regions perform at or above national averages, demonstrating the potential of well-adapted local systems. Overall, four structural challenges stand out:

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

- Women face barriers to enter and re-enter labour markets, especially in regions with limited labour market diversification and care responsibilities.

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

2. WHAT WORKS: PA08 ACTION-ORIENTED PATHWAYS

PA08 – LINK TO ACTIONS:

EDUCATION, TRAINING & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT – Aligning skills systems with labour market needs and gender equality goals

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

Recommendations:

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

PA08 – LINK TO ACTIONS:

GOVERNANCE, INCLUSION & TRAINING SYSTEM MODERNISATION – Embedding gender equality into enterprise and competitiveness governance

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

Recommendations:

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

PA08 – LINK TO ACTIONS:

Women's Networks, Mentoring & Entrepreneurship Support – Strengthening guidance, coaching, and mentoring systems for women

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

Recommendations:

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

3. POLICY IMPLICATION

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

In this context, PA08 plays a key role in:

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

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

4. CONTACT

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

WIN Project – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions, Flagship project of EUSDR PA09 2025

Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027

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

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5. WIN KNOWLEDGE & EVIDENCE BASE

This policy brief is based on findings and pilot activities from the WIN – Women in Industrial Towns project.

Further evidence and tools include:

- Project video
 - Transnational research on gendered labour market barriers
 - Case study-based research on local labour markets in WIN regions
 - Pilot action documentation from seven industrial regions
 - Good practice compendium on women's employment and social innovation across all 14 countries of the Danube Region
 - Stakeholder interviews and policy analysis
 - Policy recommendations for multi-level governance in the Danube Region
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Connecting Skills, Labour Market Access and Gender Equality in Danube Industrial Regions

WIN Policy Brief addressing EUSDR PA09 – People & Skills

WIN – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions | Flagship Project of PA09 | Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027

KEY MESSAGE

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

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

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

1. WHY THIS MATTERS

The WIN project (“Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions”) has addressed persistent gender gaps in employment across industrial towns and peripheral industrial regions in the Danube area. These regions are characterised by structural challenges, including sectoral concentration, limited labour market diversification, and gender norms shaping education and career pathways.

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

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

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

- Women continue to face barriers to labour market entry and re-entry, particularly in regions with limited labour market diversification and care responsibilities.

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

2. WHAT WORKS: PA09 ACTION-ORIENTED PATHWAYS

PA09 – LINK TO ACTIONS 3 & 4:

INTEGRATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS & SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR ALL - Reframing vulnerability through a territorial and gender lens

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

Recommendations:

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

LINK TO PA09 - ACTIONS 5 & 6:

EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS & KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND COMPETENCES – Aligning skills systems with territorial labour market needs and gender equality goals

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

Recommendations:

- Strengthen alignment between training, (higher) education, and regional labour market needs
- Promote women's participation in STEM, technical fields, and entrepreneurship
- Support flexible and lifelong learning systems adapted to different life situations
- Enhance cooperation between education providers, employers, and regional actors to provide women with integrated support combining skills development, business literacy, and other training support, particularly for vulnerable groups

LINK TO PA09 - ACTION 8:

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, EQUITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – Integrating gender equality into territorial and spatial development policies

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

Recommendations:

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

3. POLICY IMPLICATION

Strengthening inclusive and resilient labour markets in the Danube Region requires stronger integration of territorial development, skills systems, labour market policies, and gender equality objectives.

In this context, PA09 plays a key role in:

- bridging territorial and sectoral policy silos
- supporting policy learning and transfer across regions
- enabling the upscaling of effective local solutions
- strengthening coordination between skills systems, labour market policies, inclusion measures, and regional development frameworks

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

4. CONTACT

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

WIN Project – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions, Flagship project of EUSDR PA09 2025

Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027

5. WIN KNOWLEDGE & EVIDENCE BASE

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Connecting Governance, Participation & Gender in Danube Industrial Regions

WIN Policy Brief addressing EUSDR PA10 – Institutional Capacities & Cooperation

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

KEY MESSAGE

Women represent a significant, often highly skilled, part of the workforce across industrial regions in the Danube Region. However, their participation in employment is shaped not only by labour market conditions, but also by the capacity of public institutions, governance systems, and stakeholder cooperation to address structural barriers.

WIN findings show that gender inequalities in labour market outcomes are closely linked to fragmented governance structures, limited coordination across policy levels, and insufficient involvement of local actors and civil society. At the same time, many effective solutions already exist at the local level but remain isolated and difficult to scale.

These conditions are shaped across governance levels. While barriers are experienced locally and enabling frameworks are set nationally and at the European level, EUSDR PA10 plays a key role in strengthening institutional capacities, improving administrative cooperation, and supporting participatory governance across the Danube Region and facilitating the transfer of effective approaches between regions and governance levels.

1. WHY THIS MATTERS

The WIN project (“Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions”) highlights that addressing gender gaps in employment in industrial and peripheral regions requires not only targeted labour market and skills policies, but also effective governance systems.

These regions often face structural challenges, including limited institutional capacities, fragmented policy coordination, and insufficient stakeholder engagement. As a result, even well-designed policies may fail to reach women and women’s associations, who would benefit most. Three key governance challenges emerge:

- Public institutions at the local and regional level often lack the capacity and tools to address gendered labour market barriers systematically.
- Coordination between policy domains (labour market, education, regional development) and governance levels remains limited.
- The involvement of civil society, local actors, and non-state stakeholders in policy design and implementation is uneven.
- Effective local initiatives often remain project-based and are not systematically transferred, institutionalised, or scaled.

At the same time, WIN demonstrates that local initiatives—when supported by strong partnerships and governance frameworks—can effectively address gender inequalities and improve labour market outcomes.

In this context, PA10 is essential for strengthening institutional capacities, improving governance frameworks, and enabling better coordination and participation. By doing so, it supports more effective, inclusive, and place-based policy responses across the Danube Region.

2. WHAT WORKS: PA10 ACTION-ORIENTED PATHWAYS

PA10 – LINK TO OBJECTIVES 1, 8

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES & LOCAL GOVERNANCE – Strengthening capacities of public institutions and municipalities for inclusive and gender-responsive labour market policies

WIN shows that effective responses to gender inequalities in industrial regions depend on the capacity of local and regional institutions to design and implement context-sensitive policies. However, municipalities and public services often lack the resources, coordination mechanisms, and tools to address these challenges systematically. The aim is to strengthen institutional capacities and governance frameworks to deliver more inclusive, place-based public services.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen the capacities of municipalities and public institutions to address gender equality in the labour market and skills policies
- Integrate gender-sensitive and place-based approaches into local and regional policy design
- Support capacity-building for public authorities in industrial and transition regions
- Promote the use of data and evidence (e.g., from WIN) in local policy development

PA10 – LINK TO OBJECTIVES 2, 5

MULTI-LEVEL & TRANSNATIONAL GOVERNANCE – Enhancing administrative cooperation and policy coordination

WIN highlights that gender and labour market challenges are shaped across governance levels, but coordination between national, regional, and local actors remains limited. Opportunities for transnational learning and cooperation are also underutilised. The aim is to strengthen administrative cooperation and enable more coherent, cross-sectoral policy responses across the Danube Region.

Recommendations:

- Facilitate structured cooperation between national, regional, and local authorities
- Strengthen coordination between the labour market, education, and regional development policies
- Promote transnational exchange and peer learning between regions in the Danube area

- Support transfer and adaptation of successful approaches across countries and regions

PA10 – LINK TO OBJECTIVES 5, 7

PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT – Strengthening the involvement of civil society and non-state actors

WIN demonstrates that inclusive labour market policies require the active involvement of stakeholders beyond public institutions, including employers, education providers, civil society organisations, and local communities. However, their participation remains uneven and often project-based. The aim is to foster participatory governance approaches that better reflect local needs and improve policy uptake and sustainability.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen cooperation between public authorities, businesses, education providers, and civil society
- Promote participatory approaches in policy design and implementation
- Support the involvement of women's organisations and local actors in governance processes
- Encourage the development of regional stakeholder networks and partnerships

3. POLICY IMPLICATION

Strengthening inclusive and resilient labour markets in the Danube Region requires not only effective skills and labour market policies, but also strong governance systems that enable coordination, participation, policy learning, and implementation.

In this context, PA10 plays a key role in:

- strengthening institutional capacities at the local and regional level
- improving coordination across governance levels and policy domains
- enabling participatory governance and stakeholder engagement
- supporting transfer and upscaling of effective local solutions

WIN findings indicate that governance capacity is a critical enabling factor for both gender equality and regional development. Effective local solutions already exist across the Danube Region, but their impact depends on stronger coordination, institutional learning, stakeholder involvement, and cooperation across governance levels and relevant EUSDR Priority Areas.

4. CONTACT

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

WIN Project – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions, Flagship project of EUSDR PA09 2025

5. WIN KNOWLEDGE & EVIDENCE BASE

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Further evidence and tools include:

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Supporting Female Employment in Industrial Regions

WIN Policy Brief addressing National Stakeholders – Enabling frameworks for inclusive labour markets

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

KEY MESSAGE

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

These conditions are shaped by multiple levels of governance. While many barriers become visible at the local and regional levels, national stakeholders play a central enabling role by defining the frameworks that determine place-based access to skills, employment systems, and social infrastructure across all regions.

Addressing these challenges requires coherent national frameworks and gender-sensitive, place-based policy instruments that enable equal access to employment, skills development, and career progression across regions. Advancing gender equality in the labour market is therefore a prerequisite for inclusive growth, competitiveness, and social cohesion.

This policy brief provides practical guidance for national stakeholders to support and strengthen the conditions for gender-equal labour markets in industrial regions.

1. WHY THIS MATTERS

The WIN project (“Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions”) addresses persistent gender gaps in employment across industrial towns and peripheral industrial regions in the Danube area. These regions are characterised by structural challenges, including sectoral concentration, skills mismatches, and gender norms influencing education and career pathways.

A key insight from WIN pilots is that local and regional implementation is decisive for delivering change on the ground, while national frameworks are essential for scaling, sustaining, and systematising successful approaches. Effective change depends on the interaction between locally tested solutions and nationally coherent policy environments that enable their replication and long-term uptake.

WIN findings highlight that national frameworks determine whether locally developed solutions can be scaled, sustained, and embedded into systemic policy change.

2. WHAT WORKS: NATIONAL ENABLING PATHWAYS

PATHWAY 1: ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION & SKILLS - Enable access to quality employment and future-oriented sectors

This pathway requires national frameworks that shape skills systems, labour market policy, and economic transition strategies. It aims to promote the participation of women in high-quality employment and emerging economic fields.

National enabling actions:

- Promote gender-balanced labour market participation through national employment and equality strategies
- Align national skills strategies with labour market transformation (digital, green, STEM sectors)
- Expand lifelong learning, reskilling, and upskilling systems for women
- Strengthen support for women's entrepreneurship and access to finance
- Promote place-based and gender-responsive active labour market policies
- Support structured return-to-work and career re-entry mechanisms

Good practices

- *Equal Pay Day Slovakia* is a national campaign that serves as an important platform for open discussion on the gender pay gap. It raises awareness of the issue and promotes solutions at individual, company, and policy levels. The initiative brings together key stakeholders, including experts, employers, state institutions, NGOs, media, and the public, ensuring diverse perspectives and practical outcomes. Equal Pay Day Slovakia is a year-round set of activities that culminates in a main conference, creating a sustained and multi-layered approach to addressing pay inequality, advocating a gender-equal approach to income and wages.

PATHWAY 2: SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES - Reduce structural barriers to labour market participation

This pathway depends on national investment and regulation in care systems, mobility, and working conditions. It improves the labour market participation of women across all regions.

National enabling actions:

- Invest in accessible childcare and eldercare systems
- Promote flexible working arrangements through labour regulation and incentives
- Improve transport and mobility systems connecting peripheral regions to labour markets
- Integrate care economy considerations into national development strategies
- Promote gender-sensitive public service provision

Good practices:

- The “Gerontodomaćice” initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a transferable model connecting care infrastructure with labour market participation. It delivers accessible eldercare services while creating flexible and part-time employment opportunities for women, especially in rural areas. Through formal training, certification, and paid positions, the initiative recognises previously unpaid care work. This approach

enhances social cohesion and promotes the economic and social empowerment of women within local communities.

3. POLICY IMPLICATION

Effective national action requires coherent system-level frameworks that connect both pathways and ensure alignment between labour market policy, skills systems, and social infrastructure.

- Strengthening skills systems and employment pathways
- Ensuring effective social infrastructure and care systems
- Supporting local and regional innovation through stable national policy environments

National stakeholders play a key role in scaling, sustaining, and integrating successful local and regional initiatives into broader policy frameworks. At the same time, they ensure that national strategies and guidelines are effectively translated and implemented at the regional and local levels.

4. CONTACT

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- Policy recommendations for multi-level governance in the Danube Region

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Unlocking Female Employment in Industrial Regions

WIN Policy Brief addressing Local and Regional Stakeholders – Implementing inclusive labour markets

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

KEY MESSAGE

Women represent a significant, often highly skilled, part of the workforce in industrial towns and regions across the Danube Region. However, their participation in the labour market remains limited by structural barriers in skills systems, labour market organisation, care infrastructure, and persistent gender norms.

These barriers are highly visible at local and regional levels – in workplaces, training systems, municipal services, spatial planning, and cooperation with employers. Therefore, local and regional stakeholders play a central implementation role.

Addressing these challenges requires active local and regional engagement to remove barriers and create enabling conditions for equal participation in employment, skills development, and career progression. Advancing gender equality at this level is essential for strengthening local labour market inclusion, skills utilisation, and long-term regional competitiveness

This policy brief provides practical guidance for local and regional stakeholders to implement inclusive labour market measures within their direct sphere of action.

1. WHY THIS MATTERS

The WIN project (“Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions”) has addressed persistent gender gaps in employment across industrial towns and peripheral industrial regions in the Danube area. These places are often characterised by a range of gender-related challenges regarding their labour markets, including limited labour market diversification and gender norms shaping occupational choices and career progression.

A key insight from the WIN pilots is that local and regional action by multiple stakeholders is decisive, as it directly shapes access to employment, skills pathways, and everyday working conditions. Effective implementation requires coordinated engagement of public authorities (municipalities, regional governments, public employment services), education and training providers, employers and business support organisations, civil society and women’s organisations, financial institutions, and research bodies. Multi-stakeholder cooperation, aligned with regional labour market needs and supported by local governance structures, is essential for achieving sustainable and gender-equal labour market outcomes.

2. WHAT WORKS: LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION PATHWAYS

PATHWAY 1: SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT - Strengthen agency and broaden opportunities

This pathway requires active local and regional implementation across education and labour market actors, as well as community structures. It enables increased participation of women in diverse sectors and leadership pathways, leading to higher female visibility and better participation.

Local and regional implementation actions:

- Promote women role models in industry, STEM, and leadership positions
- Establish mentoring and peer-learning networks at the community and workplace level
- Ensure early exposure to technical and industrial careers in schools
- Strengthen local women's networks and community-based support structures

Good practice:

- *Girls' Day in Styria* (Austria) promotes women role models in industry, STEM, and leadership positions. It ensures early exposure to technical and industrial careers in schools, establishes mentoring and peer-learning networks at the community and workplace levels, and in the regional labour market. Targeting girls aged 12 to 16, the initiative shapes early-stage professional orientation, providing both an opportunity to try out real tasks (e.g., soldering, programming, or 3D printing) and to gain practical experience in a participating company. Around 150 Styrian companies open their doors and provide an insight into the world of technology, crafts, and science.

PATHWAY 2: LOCAL LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION – Providing access to jobs, skills, and sustainable careers

This pathway depends on coordinated implementation by local and regional stakeholders working with employers, training providers, and employment services. It creates better skill-matching and increases participation of women in local economies

Local and regional implementation actions:

- Align vocational education and training with local labour market needs in cooperation with employers
- Strengthen partnerships between SMEs, employment services, and training providers
- Support structured upskilling, reskilling, and return-to-work pathways
- Promote flexible and inclusive recruitment and workplace practices

Good practice:

- The *Family-First Flexibility program* (Hungary) demonstrates the societal benefits of investing in accessible childcare, flexible work arrangements, and a human-centred approach in a company from a peripheral industrial town. Launched in 2015, the program supports mothers returning from maternity leave by offering flexible shifts, adjustable start times, and training opportunities. By removing barriers to maternal employment, it has built a loyal workforce, reduced job turnover, and increased job satisfaction. The program's impact extended beyond the local site, inspiring its adoption

by the Danish parent company, demonstrating scalability and influence on corporate policy.

PATHWAY 3: LOCAL ECOSYSTEM COORDINATION - Building partnerships for long-term inclusive development

This pathway connects municipalities and civil society actors to co-design and implement practical measures that move beyond formal compliance towards measurable change in local gender equality outcomes.

Local and regional implementation actions:

- Establish multi-stakeholder platforms (municipalities, employers, education, civil society)
- Integrate gender equality objectives into local and regional development strategies
- Improve data collection and monitoring of women's labour market participation
- Ensure long-term support, scaling, and institutionalisation of effective initiatives

Good practice:

- *Gender Equality Action Plans in Slovenia* provide an example of a local and regional collaborative eco-system aimed at promoting gender equality. It also supports the development, review, and improvement of GEPs for municipalities and other institutions. The initiative connects various stakeholders, such as municipalities and NGOs. The aim is to co-design and implement practical, feasible measures, advocating for gender equality. Aligned with Horizon Europe requirements on GEP adoption, the approach goes beyond formal compliance by ensuring that actions are practical, systematic, and focused on real change.

3. IMPLEMENTATION PRINCIPLE

Effective action at the local and regional levels requires coordinated implementation across all three pathways:

- Active strengthening of agency and visibility of women in the labour market
- Direct connection of skills development to employment opportunities
- Structured coordination between public authorities, employers, and education providers

Local and regional stakeholders are key actors in ensuring that these elements are implemented as a coordinated system of local labour market inclusion, skills development, and gender equality action.

4. CONTACT

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

WIN Project – Improving the position of Women in the labour markets of peripheral Industrial regions, Flagship project of EUSDR PA09 2025

5. WIN KNOWLEDGE & EVIDENCE BASE

This policy brief is based on findings and pilot activities from the WIN – Women in Industrial Towns project.

Further evidence and tools include:

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