



# Enhancing Female Leadership Skills

A guide for policymakers



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Erasmus+ Programme  
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The “Women Making Waves – Enhancing Female Leadership Skills” project aims to empower double disadvantaged women to develop their leadership skills and strengths.

It aims to increase women's confidence, self-awareness, employability and leadership opportunities and close the gender gap in such positions by increasing and supporting female representation.

It also aims to build closer connections between women seeking to develop their careers across Europe with a cross-border support system, and address social inclusion by helping doubly disadvantaged women achieve their career goals.



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## A Guide for Policymakers

### *Paving the way for double disadvantaged women towards leadership roles*

Dear reader,

This policymakers guide is created to encourage and inspire European policymakers and other actors involved in personal and educational development to create the environment needed for women to reach their full potentials in their career advancement, leadership roles and economic income. This guide introduces the results of the Women Making Waves project. It offers recommendations and guidance on how to challenge existing trends in gender inequalities, as well as methods and tools to encourage, support and empower women in pursue of their career goals and leadership roles.

While shedding a light on the inequalities and challenges women face in pursuing leadership positions, and the economic and social consequences of such inequalities, Women Making Waves has put special emphasis on empowering a specific target group, double disadvantaged women.

The team behind the Women Making Waves project consists of professionals from Iceland<sup>1</sup>, the UK<sup>2</sup>, Spain<sup>3</sup> and Greece<sup>4</sup>, that together developed and advanced innovative learning tools and teaching materials that were tested and applied to groups of women faced with double disadvantage in the partner countries. Women with double disadvantages face additional and more complex challenges when pursuing leadership positions.

This guide offers an insight into those challenges and constrains along with suggested tools and methods to address them and empower this vulnerable group of women, raise their self-confidence and strengthen their employability profiles. All with the ultimate aim of helping them attain stronger leadership positions and contribute to levelling the existing gender inequalities.

We hope that you find this guide useful and that it will inspire your work towards creating equal opportunities for men and all women in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> [Directorate of Equality & Icelandic Regional Development Institute.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Inova Consultancy LTD.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Agrupación Empresarial Innovadora de Fabricantes de Muebles de la Región de Murcia \(AMUEBLA\).](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Intitute of Entrepreneurship Development.](#)

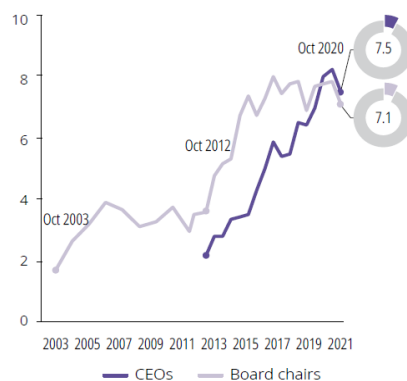
## I. Introduction to the project *Women Making Waves – Enhancing Female Leadership Skills*

### The challenge

The European Union (EU) faces unprecedented levels of unemployment, and the gender gap remains a prevalent issue Europe-wide. The issue is high on the European Commission's (EC) political agenda, e.g. with its Strategy for Equality between Women and Men. When we move from labour market participation to women's representation in decision-making positions, the gender gaps are exacerbated. Even in countries in which women participate in the labour market in high numbers, only a minority of leadership positions are occupied by women.

The number of women engaging in top-level business decision-making roles remains dramatically low, according to statistics on gender representation on corporate boards throughout the world: only about 1 in 5 C-suite leaders is a woman, and only 1 in 25 is a woman of colour. The fact is that even the most progressive countries have yet to attain complete equality in senior management positions.

The EU campaign 'Women on the Board pledge for Europe'<sup>5</sup> set a minimum target of 40% of women on company boards by 2020, a quota still far from being achieved. Despite the EC's proposed Directive to accelerate progress improving gender balance on corporate boards progress has been slow. The proportion of women board members in the largest publicly listed companies registered in the EU Member States has increased from 11.9% in 2011, to 29.5% in 2020, largely due to the introduction of gender quotas and soft measures to increase gender balance on boards in 18 EU member states. When looking at the percentage of women among top executives in EU's large listed companies, the numbers are considerably lower, with only 7.5% of companies having a female CEO, and 7.1% with a female chair<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Percentage of women board chairs and CEOs in the largest listed companies in the EU-27, 2003-2021  
(Source: EIGE's Gender Statistics Database)

<sup>5</sup> [Women on the Board Pledge for Europe](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Statistical brief: gender balance in corporate boards, European Institute for Gender Equality \(2020\)](#)

This problem is not limited to the EU. In the Standard & Poor's 500 Index of 500 leading publicly traded companies in the U.S., the numbers are even lower where women now account for 6.2% of CEO positions<sup>7</sup>.

As previously mentioned, the increase seen in the past decade in the proportion of women in boards in Europe is largely due to gender quotas and additional soft measures applied in member states to increase gender balance. This is clearly reflected in the fact that in the six Member States with binding quotas, women accounted for 37.6% of board members of the largest listed companies, compared to 24.3% in countries that have merely taken soft measures or no action at all. However, it appears that the positive impact of binding gender quotas on boardroom composition has not yet clearly translated into progress within the executive hierarchy, with top positions continuing to be largely occupied by men (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Women in managerial positions in EU 2020<sup>8</sup>**

A change in corporate culture is needed: a study has shown that 45% of men think women are well represented in leadership when 1 in 10 senior leaders in their company is a woman. By comparison, 28% of women think this<sup>9</sup>. As consumers, shareholders and investors pay more attention to the problem of gender inequality in the labour market and there's an ongoing political and media attention, pressure for real equality is increasing. Additionally, over the last years a growing body of evidence has been presented all over the world to demonstrate the performance benefits of gender-balanced decision-making. While some progress has been achieved over the years, the figures indicate

<sup>7</sup> [Women CEOs of the S&P 500. \(2022, February 1\). Catalyst.](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Women in Managerial positions in EU 2020](#)

<sup>9</sup> McKinsey & Company (2018). ["Women in the Workplace 2018"](#).

that complete gender parity remains elusive across countries, regardless of the country's cultural traditions or current legislation.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, globally, the average distance completed to parity is at 68%, a step back compared to 2020 (-0.6 percentage points). These figures are mainly driven by a decline in the performance of large countries<sup>10</sup>. This means that another generation of women will have to wait for gender parity: as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt, closing the global gender gap has increased by a generation: from 99.5 years to 135.6 years.

*Another generation of women will have to wait for gender parity: as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt, closing the global gender gap has increased by a generation, from 99.5 years to 135.6 years.*

High-frequency data for selected economies from ILO, LinkedIn and Ipsos offer a timely analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender gaps in economic participation, as data further shows a marked decline of women's hiring into leadership roles, creating a reversal of 1 to 2 years of progress across multiple industries.

### Women facing double disadvantage

The 'double disadvantage' concept has been commonly used to understand women's participation in the labour force, including the gender gap and women's progression towards leadership roles. Women facing a double disadvantage refers to those women who experience two or more disadvantages, including the so called 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training), being a migrant, disabled, living in rural areas, in early career stages, returning to work after a long absence or pursuing a new career path.

While women generally face more barriers in their career advancement than men, double disadvantaged women are further challenged in multiple ways, e.g., through stereotypes about their abilities, lack of role models and mentoring, limited management experience, or family obligations. This issue needs addressing through the empowerment of this group of women, not only in the early stages of their careers, but also consistently during their career progression, thus strengthening and developing their leadership strengths.

### Women Making Waves project

The Women Making Waves (WMW) project has two ultimate goals. Firstly, the project aims to raise awareness of the gender gap in leadership positions and the challenges women face while advancing their careers and pursuing leadership positions. Secondly, the project focused on strengthening double disadvantaged women's leadership skills, build their self-confidence and create networks. The goal is to make them more aware of the disproportionate number of women in leadership roles and encourage them to break this pattern and "make waves".

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<sup>10</sup> World Economic Forum (2021). "[Global Gender Gap Report 2021](#)".

The project places emphasis on following topics:

#### **Women's confidence**

Increasing women's confidence, self-awareness, employability and leadership opportunities and helping to close the gender gap in such positions, by increasing and supporting female representation.

#### **Strong connections**

Building closer connections between women seeking to develop their careers across Europe with a cross-border support system, and address social inclusion by helping double disadvantaged women attain their professional goals.

#### **Women needs**

Identifying the needs of these women in relation to leadership training, aligned to business demands, in order to maximise their career opportunities and support their professional advancement.

#### **The purpose of the WMW training path is to:**

- ✓ Strengthen double disadvantaged women's leadership skills and build their self-confidence
- ✓ Increase women's self-awareness, knowledge of employability, business, and leadership opportunities
- ✓ Narrow the gender gap between men and women in leadership positions
- ✓ Build closer connections between women seeking to develop their careers across Europe with a cross-border support system
- ✓ Address social inclusion by helping women who face a double disadvantage



## II. Overview of gender equality in partner countries

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. There has been a progress over the last decades but despite that we need to do even better. We have focused on this aspect in the WMW project with the aim of empowering double disadvantaged women. In the textboxes below there you can see some facts about gender equality in the participating countries in the WMW project.

### Spain

**Spain ranks sixth** in the European Gender Equality Index presented in 2021. It obtains a score of 73.7 out of 100. This places **Spain at 5.7 points above the European average** of 68 points.

**Spanish women earn 11.1% less than men**, a wage gap that widens considerably in sectors such as science and technology, **where the difference reaches 18.7%**. Despite the fact that the average is lower than that of the European Union (14%), forecasts indicate that the global pandemic has widened the pay gap even more.

With respect to the data corresponding to the domain of gender-balance in economic decision-making, measured by the proportion of women and men on corporate boards of the largest nationally registered companies listed on stock exchanges and national central banks, **the share of members of boards in largest quoted companies, supervisory board or board of directors is 31% women** and 69% men.

Spain is the third most feminist country in the world, understood as those who defend and support equal opportunities between men and women. 6 out of 10 Spaniards consider that as society stands today, **it is better to be a man than a woman**.



### Greece

**Greece ranks last** in the European Gender Equality Index presented in 2021. It obtains a score of 52.5 out of 100, with an increase of 1.3 compared to 2018 and 3.9 compared to 2013.

These data place Greece 15.5 points below the European average of 68 points. Lastly, according to the World Economic Forum Report for 2021 **Greece was placed 98th out of 156 in the Global Gender Gap Index**.

**Women in Greece earn 20.6% less than men** in many sectors. In addition, **33% of women work full-time while 50% of men do** (2019). That's 8% down the EU average level. The global pandemic and Greece's economic depression widened the gap measurably.

In terms of gender balance in economic decision-making, as measured by the proportion of women and men on corporate boards of the largest nationally registered companies listed on stock exchanges and national central banks, **the share of members of boards in the largest quoted companies, supervisory board or board of directors is 11.5% women** and 88.5% men.

**Women hold 19.7% in Political Power Positions** while the EU average is 32.3%.



## Iceland

**Iceland has topped the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index** in previous years. The main reasons are women's political participation, high level of education and equal access to health care. **Women are 47,6% of the parliamentarians** after elections in 2021 and **47% of the members of governing bodies of municipalities are women**. Challenges ahead include promoting equality in leadership positions in politics & business, dismantling a gender segregated labour market and bridging the gender pay gap.

Women in Iceland earn on average **4,3% less than men** (2019). While being only 1,9% in the age group < 24 years old, the pay gap rises steadily along with age, reaching 21,2% in the age group of 55-64. The gap is lowest in the hospitality sector and the highest in the economy and insurance sector. In 2020, the **share of women in boards of companies with >50 employees was 34,7%** or roughly one in every three board members.

The current legislation on Gender Equality is the *Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights Irrespective of Gender*. The aim of the law is to counteract discrimination based on gender and to uphold equality and equal opportunities of all genders in society and thus promote gender equality in all spheres of society. All individuals shall have equal opportunities to benefit from their own enterprise and to develop their skills irrespective of gender.



## United Kingdom

**The UK ranked sixth** on the European Gender Equality Index in 2020, with a score of 72.7 out of a possible 100 points, placing it **4.7 points above the European average**. As for the Global Gender Gap Index, taken from the 2021 World Economic Forum Report, **the UK placed 23rd out of 156 countries**.

According to the Office for National Statistics, the gender pay gap among all full and part time UK employees was 15.4% in 2021, **meaning for every £1 the average man earned, the average woman earned just 84.6p**. Women employed full time and aged 40+ were found to be of particular disadvantage, as there were **fewer incidences of them being promoted into better paid managerial positions**, compared to their male counterparts, highlighting the persisting issue that is the 'glass ceiling', even within an advanced economy, such as the UK's. In fact, **just 36.8% of senior and managerial roles within the UK are held by women**.

**35% of MPs are women** and only **12% of people agree that gender equality has been achieved within UK politics**.

From an Ipsos survey of 16-64 year olds, just 29% of men and 41% of women defined themselves as a feminist, whilst **18% of the men also stated they'd feel uncomfortable if their boss was a woman**.



### III. Challenges facing women pursuing leadership positions

Women pursuing leadership positions face multiple challenges and constraints of various nature while pursuing their career goals and leadership roles. Leadership roles are often biased towards 'masculine' traits such as assertiveness or dominant behaviour.

Women who exhibit these behaviours are frequently perceived in a negative way, whereas, on the other hand, men are regarded in a positive way if they portray such traits, contributing to the low numbers of women in leadership roles within EU member states (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015).<sup>11</sup>

To explore the training needs of double disadvantaged women, WMW created focus groups, which consisted of women facing double disadvantaged from each of the four partner countries. When interviewed about challenges facing them while trying to advance their professional careers, the answers could be grouped into three categories:

- **Professional challenges:** lack of job opportunities, lack of support or trust from colleagues, mistreatment at work, bureaucracy, layoff, sexual harassment, economic crisis, COVID-19, lack of personal reconciliation, lack of knowledge, lack of infrastructure, impostor syndrome, bullying, sexism, male-dominated work culture, having their authority challenged by male colleagues, lack of part time jobs.
- **Family challenges:** parenting, parental leave (or lack of it), sick relatives, separation/divorce, economic independence, single parenthood.
- **Personal challenges:** lack of self-confidence, anxiety, disabilities, depression, social class, difficulties during childhood, lack of self-esteem, being taken seriously because of their personality/voice tone, self-doubt, emotional independence, cultural challenges.

Diving further into the professional challenges, either faced in their past and today, the top-ranking challenges were, in this order: lack of mentoring, limited network of contacts, difficulties to balance personal and professional life, limited support from company management and lack of support from family and/or relatives.

#### Main challenges women face in their journey towards leadership

- Bias towards masculine traits
- Cultural challenges
- Sexual harassment
- Imposter syndrome

#### Additional challenges faced by double disadvantaged women

- Stereotypes implying limited abilities
- Lack of role models
- Limited mentoring
- Limited management experience
- Family obligations and motherhood penalty

<sup>11</sup> [Report on Gender Equality in Power and Decision-Making, European Institute for Gender Equality \(2015\)](#)

A key element of the WMW project is that participants not only acquire theoretical knowledge of the inequalities they are up against but receive practical tools to combat these inequalities (e.g., soft skills development). This is not to say that the responsibility for change lies on the shoulders of the women themselves. Addressing biases and changing cultural norms is a slow process and the responsibility of society as a whole, to be led by policy makers within the political, economic, and civic spheres. The aim of the project is rather to acknowledge the reality of doubly disadvantaged women's surroundings and providing them with knowledge and tools to be better equipped to advance within an environment that may be inherently biased.

## IV. The social and economic consequences of gender imbalances on boards

The persisting gender imbalance among key decision-makers in big corporations and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) represents a large untapped pool of qualified human resources, as indicated by the disparity between women's rising involvement in the labour market, the high number of female graduates, and their underrepresentation in senior positions. This disparity undeniably represents a waste of valuable and highly qualified human resources, which doesn't only manifest in the loss of career opportunities for women, but also in the loss of benefits for the economy as a whole.

### Social consequences

The effects of the lack of women in decision-making positions in a company can be three-fold. Firstly, studies have reported that a larger gender pay gap is more likely to prevail in companies with fewer female high-status managers<sup>12</sup>. Secondly, women who work with a male supervisor perceive less organisational support, compared with those who work with a female supervisor, and women who work in departments that are headed by a man report experiencing more gender discrimination, compared with their counterparts in departments headed by women<sup>13</sup>. Lastly, in these types of gender imbalanced business scenarios, it is also more difficult for women to find female mentors because there is a lack of women in high-ranking positions, which ultimately might hinder their own chances of reaching top-level positions in a company because of the lack of representation and role models.

#### Benefits of a strong women's representation in decision-making positions

- Less gender pay gap
- More organisational support
- Less gender discrimination
- Gender supportive policies
- Female mentors and role models for other women to follow
- Higher quality institutions and organisations
- Positive effect on economic outcomes
- New direction into previously unexplored policy ground

It is also important to understand that when people of an organisation believe that diverse groups are included, empowered, and treated fairly, a favourable atmosphere for diversity occurs. If this kind of work environment is not present, studies show that women are more likely to quit, contributing to women's underrepresentation in already male-dominated areas.

It has been proven that the gender of organisational leaders affects the degree to which there is gender discrimination, gender supportive policies, and a gender diversity supportive climate within an organisation<sup>14</sup>. This means that members of a workplace are more likely to perceive that the climate

<sup>12</sup> Cohen P. N. & Huffman M. L. (2007). "[Working for the woman? Female managers and the gender wage gap](#)".

<sup>13</sup> Konrad A. M., Cannings K. & Goldberg C. B. (2010). "[Asymmetrical demography effects on psychological climate for gender diversity: differential effects of leader gender and work unit gender composition among Swedish doctors](#)".

<sup>14</sup> Ostroff C., Kinicki A. J. & Muhammad R. S. (2012). "[Organizational culture and climate](#)" in Handbook of Psychology, Industrial and Organizational Psychology.

for women is positive when women hold key positions in the organisation, as this acts as a vivid symbol indicating that the company supports gender diversity actively and effectively.

While it is true that gender inequality in the workplace is a tremendously complex phenomenon that affects the hiring, training, pay and promotion of women, it has been well proven that there are two types of sexism in the business sphere. While hostile sexism can lead to discrimination against women driven by the eagerness to keep them from positions of power, benevolent sexism can lead to discrimination against women because of a desire to protect them<sup>15</sup>.

Improvements in gender equality would lead to an additional 10.5 million jobs in 2050, which would benefit both women and men. About 70% of these jobs would be taken by women, however female and male employment rates meet in the long run, reaching an 80% employment rate by 2050<sup>16</sup>. New jobs occupied by women are particularly important as they can help to reduce poverty, one of the key priorities of the EU 2020 strategy. Women are generally affected by poverty more often than men because of lower employment and salary prospects. Hence, being in employment lowers the risk for poverty of women (EIGE, 2016)<sup>17</sup>.

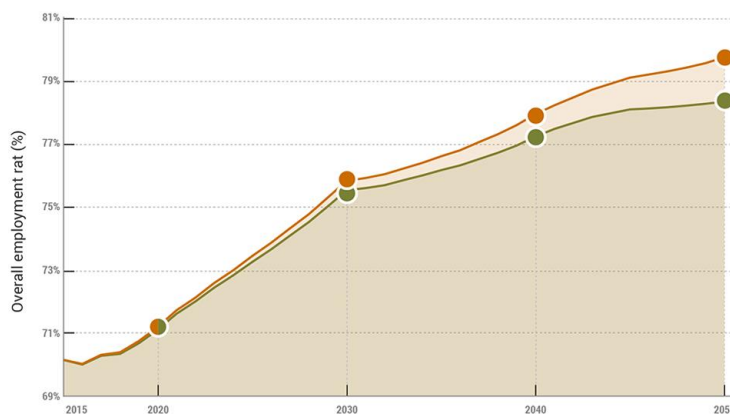


Figure 3. Effect of gender equality on employment in the EU. Source: EIGE 'Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union'<sup>17</sup>.

## Economic consequences

A more gender equal EU would have strong, positive GDP impacts growing over time, higher level of employment and productivity and could respond to challenges related to the ageing population in the EU<sup>18</sup>. Gender equality has strong, positive impacts on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita which

<sup>15</sup> Starnarski C. & Son Hing L. (2015). "Gender inequalities in the workplace: the effects of organizational structures, processes, practices, and decision makers' sexism".

<sup>16</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (2017). "Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union. Overall economic impacts of gender equality".

<sup>17</sup> EIGE 'Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union'. <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/economic-and-financial-affairs/economic-benefits-gender-equality>.

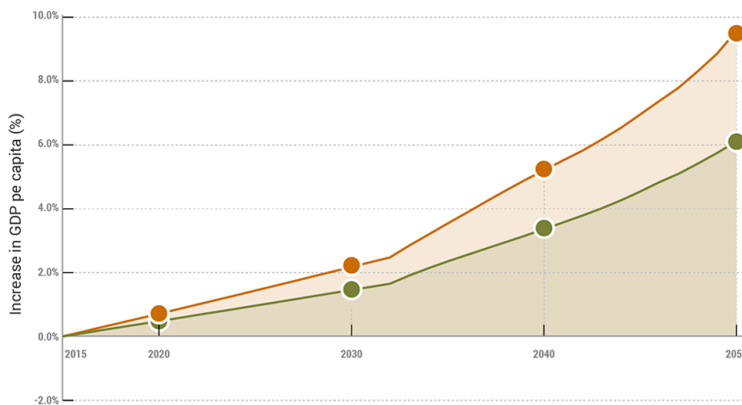
<sup>18</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (2017). "Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union. Overall economic impacts of gender equality".

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grow over time. By 2050, improving gender equality would lead to an increase in EU (GDP) per capita by 6.1 to 9.6%, which amounts to €1.95 to €3.15 trillion.

Compared with labour market and education policies, gender equality policies have a strong impact on GDP. For example, a recent study showed that improvements in educational attainment across EU Member States would lead to a 2.2% increase in EU GDP in 2050 (DG EAC, 2016)<sup>19</sup>.



**Figure 4.** Effect of gender equality on GDP per capita in the EU. Source: EIGE 'Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union'<sup>19</sup>.

The estimated GDP impacts of increased gender equality vary considerably across Member States, depending on the present level of achievement of gender equality. Countries with more room to improve gender equality have much to gain. On average, improved gender equality in these countries is expected to lead to an increase in GDP of about 12% by 2050<sup>20</sup>. The best performing countries when it comes to gender equality have already achieved good levels of gender equality and therefore already enjoy some of the associated economic benefits. However, further improvements in gender equality can generate additional economic gains even in these Member States, often reaching around 4% of GDP.

Overall, improved gender equality could boost the long-term competitiveness of the EU economy. By 2050, exports are estimated to increase by about 0.7% whereas imports are forecast to decline by up to 1.2%, leading to an improved balance of trade.

### Between the sticky floor and the glass ceiling

The *glass ceiling*, in essence, is a condition in which pay disparities between men and women are greater at the end of the wage distribution. The term refers to a barrier to progress in the workforce that exists between men and women once they have reached a particular level. The *sticky floor*, on the other hand, may be seen as the polar opposite of the *glass ceiling*, which occurs when pay

<sup>19</sup> EIGE 'Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union'. <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/economic-and-financial-affairs/economic-benefits-gender-equality>

<sup>20</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (2017). "Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the European Union. Overall economic impacts of gender equality".

inequalities increase near the bottom of the wage distribution. The European Institute for Gender Equality defines this expression as a metaphor used to point to a discriminatory employment pattern that keeps workers, mainly women, in the lower ranks of the job scale, with low mobility and invisible barriers to career advancement<sup>21</sup>. The term *sticky floor* was coined in 1992 by Catherine Berheide in a report for the Centre for Women in Government. Catherine Berheide was subsequently interviewed in 1993, where she stated, “most women should be so lucky to have the *glass ceiling* as their problem. Many [women are] mired in .... the *sticky floor*.”

The finding of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Economics Department Working Papers<sup>22</sup> suggest that, on average, *sticky floor* related to social norms, gender stereotyping and discrimination account for 40% of the gender wage gap, while the *glass ceiling* related to the motherhood penalty accounts for around 60%. The importance of the *glass ceiling* is especially large in most Northern and Western European countries, while *sticky floor* explains a major part of the gap in most Central and Eastern European countries. These results imply that most Northern and Western European countries need to prioritise policies to address the motherhood penalty, such as further promoting flexitime and telework and supporting early childcare.

Most Central and Eastern European as well as Southern European countries, where *sticky floors* are more prevalent, additionally need to prioritise equal pay and pay transparency laws, measures to address gender stereotyping, competition in product markets, as well as higher wage floors where they are currently low.

### Corporate gains of improved gender equality

At this point, it is clear that gender discrimination not only results in unequal outcomes in businesses, but it also causes efficiency losses, such as a waste of talent and a lack of incentives to invest in human capital, ultimately leading to inefficient resource allocation. When affirmative action measures force companies to actively seek out women, the most competent women are appointed, and the overall quality of representatives could actually increase. By reducing the inefficiency losses associated with discrimination, action measures such as these may generate efficiency gains<sup>23</sup>. For example, it is recognized that women are less susceptible to corruption, more responsible and absent less often<sup>24</sup>. Finally, having a more gender-balanced leadership may induce more women to become more competitive in nature and pursue similar positions, thereby further enlarging the talent pool. Thus, a virtuous positive circle of quality may begin.

Companies with greater gender equality in their workforce and top management can reach a whole range of other benefits, beyond what has already been mentioned here. They are better able to attract and retain female talent, to motivate their female workers, to understand and respond to the needs of female customers and to better address complex problems by incorporating more diverse views. Businesses with more women in top leadership and board positions enjoy stronger financial

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<sup>21</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality [Glossary & Thesaurus](#).

<sup>22</sup> Ciminelli, G., C. Schwellnus & B. Stadler (2021), “[Sticky floors or glass ceilings? The role of human capital, working time flexibility and discrimination in the gender wage gap](#)”.

<sup>23</sup> Profeta P. (2016). “[Gender Equality in Decision-Making Positions: The Efficiency Gains](#)”.

<sup>24</sup> D. Dollar, R. Frisman & R. Gatti (199). “Are women really the “fairer” sex? Corruption and women in government”.



performance<sup>25</sup>, and gender-diverse teams are correlated with higher financial returns and innovation<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, companies should focus on the critical “middle management” level, where women can stall in their careers. Research suggests that providing women with elevated responsibilities and the opportunity to manage high-value assignments may actually be the greatest predictor of success and advancement<sup>27</sup>.

Women in the workplace should be challenged, while organisations should feel empowered to promote a modernized and flexible working environment where everyone can grow, be themselves, and reconcile a successful profession with their life outside of work. On the other hand, any attempt to address gender equality in the boardroom must be accompanied by efforts to address diversity all through the company. It's not just contradictory and disingenuous to do one without the other; it's also ineffective.

***Now more than ever, our workforce should represent the diverse society we live in, and it is on business leaders to put this vision into action. When it comes to diversity, leaders may set the tone at the top and, consequently, make gender balance a priority throughout the company.***

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<sup>25</sup> Noland, M., Moran T. & Kotschwar B. (2016). [“Is Gender Diversity Profitable? Evidence from a Global Survey”](#).

<sup>26</sup> Klugman J. & Tyson L. (2016). [“Leave no one behind: A call to action for gender equality and women’s economic empowerment”](#).

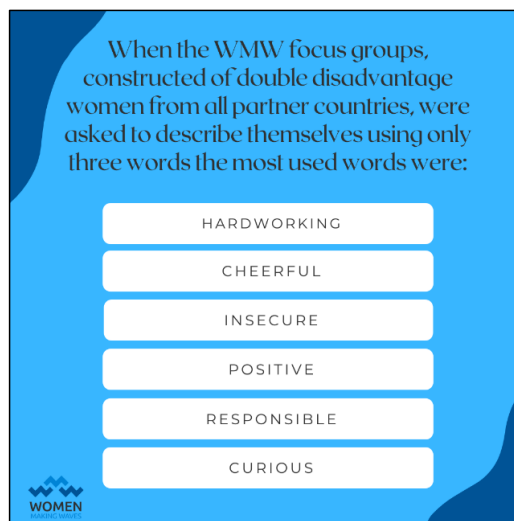
<sup>27</sup> Silva C. & Ibarra H. (2012) [“Study: Women Get Fewer Game-Changing Leadership Roles”](#).

## V. How to inspire female leadership

Beyond management skills, leadership in the 21st century requires personality, behaviour, values, and qualities that are required to tackle huge political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological concerns. The way we act and view organised action is impacted by a collective phenomenon and our social construction. The WMW analysis of key personal barriers double disadvantaged women face highlighted their general lack of self-confidence and insecurities.

The highest scoring factor, when asked about their professional challenges in advancing in their career, was the lack of mentoring and limited network of contacts. Considering these factors together, i.e., the general lack of self-confidence and lack of mentoring, it can be assumed that the limited visibility of female leaders and lack of female mentors and role models is a major disadvantage for women with double disadvantage.

Creating an environment where these women are exposed to strong female leaders, mentors and role models could therefore have large impacts in how they perceive themselves in the role of a leader and empower them to look past their insecurities and instead, focus on their strengths and leadership potentials.



### Ways to empower women

Regardless of their skillsets and strengths, women with a double disadvantage tend to be held back by their insecurities and lack of self-confidence. This is learned through both past experiences and social norms, and not least from the general lack of female role models and leaders belonging to minority groups. Building a strong and empowering working and learning environment around women, where they are exposed to strong female leaders with diverse backgrounds, strengths, and leadership approaches, is therefore of utmost importance.

The masculine ideal of a successful entrepreneur, especially within science, engineering and technology related fields, is painted all throughout social media, education and policies in most countries, which proves demotivating for women pursuing these roles. When aiming to create such an empowering environment, whether that is within the workplace, educational programmes, policy making or other platforms of female growth, keeping these three elements as a guiding light could be effective.

### Exposure to female leaders and role models

Recent findings from the Facebook-OECD-World Bank Future of Business survey in 95 countries<sup>28</sup> demonstrate that on average 50% of entrepreneurs have role models when growing up, with women more often having female role models and men having male role models. The importance of strong female leaders and role models in all sectors is therefore extremely important. They set examples, demonstrate a way forward that may not have been visible to women before, through pathways not explored by them.

Ensuring exposure to female role models in schools, through educational- and training programmes, as well as in the workplace, the political and policy making environment is a powerful and effective way to empower women to face their insecurities and pursue their career goals.

### **Women supporting women**

With so many roadblocks in the way of gender equality, women must have each other for support, despite culture's tendency to turn humans against one another. Instead of holding each other back, women must urge one other forward. You may inspire future and aspiring female leaders by leveraging the collective energy of women.

### **Trusting the female intuition**

As more women enter the C-suite or start their own companies, embracing the feminine energy by urging women to trust their intuition, amplify compassion, and embody patience, can lead to a more holistic business. Historically, and even still to this day, women have been encouraged to emulate masculine leadership qualities to climb the corporate ladder. However, when women step into their true identities with openness, transparency, owning emotions, being clear about values, vulnerabilities and fears, modern audiences embrace the humanness when it comes to leading (Figure 6). With regards to the working environment, women can bring huge leader interactive abilities that facilitate cooperation and put spotlight on getting the best to their people.

Women are more likely to empower a degree of mindfulness and are more likely to be aware of the wellbeing of their team. Women who tap into their expansive thinking tend to expand strategy to a longer-term view. Women often see possibilities through innovative ideas and innovative thinking, value empathy and collaboration which is part of their hard wiring. Women leaders tend to express competition differently than male leaders by influencing relationships, verified by recent research comparing the leadership skills between women and men (Figure 6).

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/gender/data/can-role-models-encourage-woman-to-step-off-the-beaten-path-and-become-entrepreneurs.htm>

## Women Outscored Men on Most Leadership Competencies

According to an analysis of 360-degree reviews during the pandemic, women were rated higher on most competencies.



Source: Zenger Folkman, 2020

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**Figure 6.** Leadership Competencies Scores by Harvard Business Review<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> [A study in leadership](#)

## VI. The importance of consistent career support for double disadvantaged women

The aim of the WMW project is to support double disadvantaged women in their learning journey towards reaching their goals, both in the labour market and their personal lives. Women in this minority group can benefit greatly from dedicated educational and training programs that address their specific needs and support them in their path of learning and advancing their careers.

Training is key to achieving most professional objectives. The more educated and trained double disadvantaged women become, the more they acquire and apply critical thinking and experience, offering them increased opportunities for individual growth and career advancements. Recent studies by Haque and Haque (2020 & 2022) on migrant non-English speaking women in Australia demonstrate that by improving their English proficiency, education, recognition of overseas qualifications and experiences at the labour market, their chances of participation in the Australian labour market are likely to significantly increase<sup>30,31</sup>.

To be able to develop training material that would meet the needs of the WMW target group, a first step was to understand the training needs of double disadvantaged women. An analysis was conducted through focus group interviews to explore how past training and education has empowered double disadvantaged women in achieving their professional and personal goals. The top-ranking answers were as follows:

- Building confidence and self-belief
- Understanding the cultural differences and breaking down barriers
- Acquiring new knowledge on how to focus on themselves and their abilities to take the next steps to a successful life
- Testing their skills and building upon them
- Widening their perspective and seeing new opportunities
- Forcing them to communicate with others and thus seeing that they too have something to contribute
- Being inspired by other people

The focus group interviews clearly highlighted the demand and importance of continuous training to support this group of women in reaching their professional goals. According to the focus group analysis, the lack of mentoring and limited network of contacts seemed to be a major hurdle in career advancement. This analysis was used as basis towards the next phase of the WMW project: the formulation of the training path.

### **How can women respond to the challenges they face in their personal life as well as in their careers?**

In WMW, we strived to find the answer to this question. This was the core question in our focus group analysis and led us to the formulation of the WMW training path. Our main findings underline the need to support double disadvantaged women to build their self-confidence, strengths, and resilience to “lean in and take action” towards the next steps in their learning journey and reaching their

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<sup>30</sup> Haque, T. H., & Haque, M. O. (2020). Double disadvantage? The slow progress of non-English-speaking migrant women in accessing good jobs in Australia. *Labour & Industry: a journal of the social and economic relations of work*, 30(3), 256-282.

<sup>31</sup> Haque, T. H., & Haque, M. O. (2021). The steady progress of Non-English-Speaking migrant women's labour market participation in Australia. *Studies in Economics and Econometrics*, 45(3), 131-148.

personal and professional goals. Furthermore, WMW has emphasized how women networks can become powerful. Therefore, the WMW program recommends building up women's network where they can have access to a platform to learn together, build their self-confidence, support each other as peers and help each other in reaching their individual goals.

*In her book, **Lean in, women, work and the will to lead**, author and business executive Sheryl Sandberg urges women to lean in and take actions towards their careers. Women must fight against the lack of self-confidence and internalized gender stereotypes to forge fulfilling and reward their personal and professional lives. She also points out women must confront their own power and stop trying to please everyone. The power of "leaning in" and "raising your hand" are skills women will need to reach their goals, to be heard and will empower women to achieve their full potential.*

Sandberg, Sheryl (2013). *Lean in: women, work and the will to lead* (1st edition).  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf

### The five products of the WMW project

1. **Women Making Waves Competence Framework**

A European scale analysis of the current situation of double disadvantaged women in the labour market. An investigation of their needs and skills needed for development. The final Competence Framework can be found [here](#).

2. **Women Making Waves Training Programme - Enhancing Female Leadership skills.**

A training aimed at double disadvantaged women to develop their skills and employability through active learning, coaching and role playing.

3. **Leader Circles™**

A peer mentoring programme with a facilitator combining action learning, coaching, and mentoring principles to support individuals.

4. **Women Making Waves E-learning Academy**

An online learning platform where training materials and the Women Making Waves Portfolio can be found. The WMW E-learning Platform is available [here](#).

5. **Policymakers Guide "Women Making Waves - Enhancing Female Leadership Skills"**

An outline of recommendations to stakeholders and policymakers to help decrease the gender gap in leadership positions.

### Testimonials from the participants in the training program

*„The training programme helped me to better see strengths and weaknesses, as well as giving me the tools to work on my weaknesses.“*

*„I think the curriculum is going to help me better understand how to deal with a variety of issues, whether it's better communication skills or increased self-motivation.“*

*„The training has made me a better listener. I will be more aware of whether I am giving sufficient feedback to let the person speaking know that I am listening and accepting what the person in question is saying.“*

*„Helps make us understand which type of leaders we want to be. Useful in many things not just in employment but also in bringing up children.“*

*„The training has helped me be more vigilant about discrimination that women face and made me realize better how important it is for everyone not to tolerate it. After the education, I am much more likely to stand up for myself and other women experiencing discrimination.“*

## The value of Reflective Practice Training for building women's leadership skills

### What is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice is the process of developing self-awareness and critical thinking in order to examine one's assumptions and gain new insights about everyday practice. Reflective practice, then, is a process that is based on learning through and from experience and it is considered to be a component of life-long learning<sup>32</sup>. This learning is an active process<sup>33</sup> that encourages engagement among teachers and learners and benefits all prompting innovation, confidence, engagement, and taking responsibility. If reflective practice is used within an institution, the results will be to engage the team further developing relationships of trust and mutual respect and ultimately creating a productive working environment.

There are different theoretical models of facilitating reflective practice. Here the [Mentoring Circles™](#)<sup>34</sup> methodology has been used to facilitate the Leader Circles for the Women Making Waves project, which was developed by Inova Consultancy in 2001. The Mentoring Circles™ methodology encourages the learners to ask open questions instead of giving advice to each other, thus facilitating self-reflection and the gaining of new insights on everyday practice. This chapter will detail the Reflective Practice Training methodology used in the WMW project for building women's leadership skills.

<sup>32</sup> [Finlay, 2008](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Getting started with Reflective Practice](#)

<sup>34</sup> <https://mentoringcircles.org.uk/>

## What is the Mentoring Circles™ methodology?

The [Mentoring Circles™ methodology](#) is a unique and innovative approach to mentoring, combining both the benefits of one-to-one sessions with a mentor and those of peer support group sessions. The methodology is most beneficial to participants who want to engage in personal reflection and self-development and it involves a combination of action learning, coaching and peer mentoring. These principles provide mentees with a wider source of support and inspiration for idea generation and greater creativity in problem-solving during crucial times in their life.

The format of the Leader Circles was also based on the Mentoring Circles™ methodology. Each session was facilitated by one trained group mentor and attended by up to 5 participants/leaders. Each participant is guaranteed enough time to think and explain about their areas of development, work with the other participants based on the questioning technique and then arrive at some self-reflections and ideas about solutions to any problems and future practice.

The final aim of each session is that participants create an action plan with their actions for the future and they are accountable to the group for taking actions on those points before the next session. This methodology was adapted to support women looking to develop their leadership skills and to help them reach higher positions. The aim was to encourage soft skill attainment and break through the glass ceiling.

## Methodologies in the Mentoring / Leader Circles

### Questioning

As mentioned earlier, the Mentoring Circles™ methodology encourages questioning rather than advice-giving. This is because, through questioning, each participant is encouraged to think about their own problems and areas of development in a mindful and focused manner. Advice-giving can be useful and helpful if it is targeted and specific. If it is general, however, it can encourage a more passive stance at facing one's own problems and remove the sense of responsibility and ownership over one's self-development.

### Action planning through SMART goal setting

Action planning is the ability to make plans and steps to achieve goals. SMART goal setting can support this process as an easy-to-use tool.

Following this tool, each participant can create a unique goal and action plan by defining the goal and focus, considering how to measure the goal by describing a clear outcome; ensuring that this said outcome is achievable and that the goal is relevant to the participant's current situation and aspirations, and finally defining clear deadlines about when the goal should be achieved that are realistic.

#### SMART goals stand for:

**S** → Specific

**M** → Measurable

**A** → Attainable

**R** → Relevant

**T** → Timely

## How can this methodology help women develop leadership skills?

The Circles methodology can be used to develop leadership in women, especially those experiencing double disadvantages, but the methodology can be used by anyone. Below is an example of how the Circles can help with the development of leadership skills.



### **A Case Study of Lorna**

*- Event Organiser*

*Lorna attended the Circles to learn how to develop her leadership skills at work and be able to delegate tasks. She is a lone parent and a carer for her mother. These challenges have made it difficult for her to make time for her self-development. She has joined the first session of the Circles where the methodology was presented and she was given some time to present her challenges. Other learners and the facilitator used questioning methodology to ask her some useful questions which helped her to dig deeper into her challenges and how she can overcome these. She took part in reflective exercises during the session where she was also able to learn a bit more about herself and analyse her situation.*



*At the end of the session, she set herself some SMART goals to work towards before the next session which were realistic for her. One of her goals for the week was to watch a TedTalk on leadership skills. At the next session, she reported on her progress with this and shared what she had learnt. In the next session, she worked on additional exercises and set new goals. She was able to leave the Circles feeling more confident, equipped to be a "leader" and delegate tasks.*

## **VII. As told by – A role model campaign**

Role models can have powerful impacts on people that are striving for similar goals. An added benefit of combatting gender imbalance in leadership positions is the increased presence and visibility of strong female role models on the work force. It is therefore of great importance for both policymakers and educational institutions to pave the way and set the foundations to enable female role models to thrive and inspire other women in similar positions.

In order to inspire WMW project participants, as well as policymakers and other stakeholders, a few women, who have successfully managed to break through the „glass ceiling“ and are working in leadership positions in partner countries, were asked to tell their stories. The interviewees all have different backgrounds and are working in different sectors. Through these interviews, these women shared the challenges they've faced while trying to build their careers as well as the achievements they've made and their success stories. The women also reported on the barriers and difficulties they had faced in the past, e.g. in relation to their background and how they managed to confront and face them. The interviewees in the WMW Role model campaign gave inspiring recommendations for those who want to achieve a leader role at the labour market, such as:

*As a conclusion from my experience, is that no one should quit from their dreams! If you want to start an enterprise or achieve a leader role, you should constantly look for new information, knowledge and trends on that field. I think that it is the only path that is going to lead you to success.*

Participant from Greece, working within hospitality management

*Explore outside your comfort zone, be authentic (literally be yourself), make great connections by attending events you think are interesting for you and your work.*

Participant from the UK, working within communication/community support

*Try to understand which is your goal and what's needed to achieve it! Prioritize your goals and use a systematic method till you reach all your wishes!*

Participant from Greece, working within digital design

*It's hard to give advice when you don't know if you've done it right or not. You don't know if sacrificing your personal life for work has been worth it. But what is clear to me is that women cannot be left behind just because we have children, we must continue to fight for our rights that will allow us that much desired equality.*

Participant from Spain, working within education

*A job well done, constant effort and the search for excellence in what we do is the best way to demonstrate the magnificent professional that we are and the key to lead a team of professionals.*

Participant from Spain, working within the automotive industry

*To be predisposed to change, not to set barriers for oneself, not to lose focus on the challenge to be achieved, to train oneself, co-responsibility.*

Participant from Spain, working within the homeware market

*Be unafraid of barriers you face. Don't talk yourself down. Go out of your comfort zone.*

Participant from Iceland, working within literary sector, writing and editing

*You must believe in the project and make a good plan before you start. The best approach for me was to talk to people about the project, because conversations bring in others point of view and you discover things that you didn't see or know, on your own.*

Participant from Iceland, working within entrepreneurship, cultural sector

*Hard work, having some ethics, learning as knowledge is power, work life balance, having empathy and being sympathetic, knowing your goals.*

Participant from United Kingdom, working within management

The inspiring Role model campaign in whole can be found at our website:

[www.womenmakingwaves.eu](http://www.womenmakingwaves.eu)

## VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

The gender difference in leadership paints a troubling picture of the challenges and preconceptions women must overcome to obtain leadership roles globally. Women facing a double disadvantage (NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training, migrant, disabled, living in rural areas, in early career stages, women returning to work after a long absence or those pursuing a new career path, etc.) encounter even further obstacles than other women in their pursue of career advancement and leadership roles, with serious social and economic consequences, both within the workplace and in society as a whole.

Recent research, as well as the WMW analysis through focus group interviews, strongly indicate that dedicated training and empowerment of double disadvantaged women increases their chances of entering and progressing in the labour market. This training should not only be offered in the early stages of their careers, but also consistently during their career progression, focusing on developing their skills, leadership strengths and self-confidence.

The WMW project has shed a light on the cultural and social challenges facing double disadvantage women and demonstrated the need to develop and implement learning opportunities throughout women's careers. It has highlighted the need for creating strong networks of women and the importance of exposing these women to powerful role models that can support them and inspire their journey towards career advancement and leadership. This is equally important through all levels of education, their workplace and the political and policy making environment.

The project has demonstrated that in order to optimise the training opportunities women are offered, especially those facing double disadvantage, focus should not only be put on enhancing hard skills, but also on strengthening soft skills, self-confidence and networking. The Women Making Waves Training Program has been developed with this as a guiding light. It offers an accessible training programme that aims to strengthen disadvantaged women's leadership skills and build their self-confidence and raise awareness of the gender gap in leadership positions. A key element of the training program is that participants do not only acquire theoretical knowledge of the social and cultural inequalities they are up against, but also receive practical tools to combat these inequalities (e.g. soft skills development).

The Women Making Waves Training Program and Leader Circles™ are designed in such a way that it is of the highest benefit for the women participating in the training. These training tools can be implemented and offered by educators, policymakers and other stakeholders in the participating countries, aiming to strengthen and build networks for double disadvantaged women in any field of the labour market. The project highlights these following core subjects as essential to support double disadvantaged women in their careers and their personal life, thus forming the five building blocks of the WMW training program:

- 1. Personal development**
- 2. Gender equality: Breaking down barriers**
- 3. Leaning in and taking action**
- 4. Leadership skills**

## 5. Mentoring and creating positive development networks

Each part should be conducted in three hours sessions, delivered either online or face to face. The combination of the on- and offline training programmes brings a flexible approach to participants learning experience, while still considering the specific and individual needs of each participant. The material, available at the [WMW website](#), includes free access to a special *Facilitators Guide* and *Learners Pack* for each unit.

Finally, within the WMW E-Learning Academy, the project's E-learning platform for both participants and learners, participants can document their learning progression via portfolio tool. In the E-learning platform, the participants and learners can reflect on their learning path and set future goals for their leadership skills.

Another product of WMW is the Leader Circles training, a methodology which provides peer mentoring in group setting facilitated by a trainer. The Circle itself is learner-led and learner-focused and is discussed in more detail in a dedicated section above.

**Stakeholders who consider implementing the products of the WMW project in whole or in parts for their clients' groups, such as double disadvantaged women, can have free access to all the training material and all the findings in the project.**