

PROFEEDBACK POLICY BRIEF

ENHANCING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP: STAKEHOLDER-DRIVEN POLICY EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH WORLD CAFÉ METHODOLOGY

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Executive summary

This policy brief investigates the policy environment for women entrepreneurs (WEs) in Hungary, Romania (specifically Transylvania), and Spain (specifically Andalusia), drawing on a mixed-methods approach that combines desk research with participatory, stakeholder-driven evaluation using the World Café methodology. The policy brief was prepared within the framework of the RE-FEM project¹, and explores how existing policies and programmes support WEs and assesses how effectively they address the challenges women face in the entrepreneurial landscape.

Improving support mechanisms for WEs is a complex and pressing challenge. Although the number of women engaging in entrepreneurship is growing, systemic barriers persist, including limited access to finance, weak digital literacy, underrepresentation in high-value sectors, and the disproportionate burden of invisible care work. These challenges are even more pronounced for rural women and those from marginalised backgrounds. The COVID-19 crisis further exposed and worsened these vulnerabilities, prompting the EU to call for more inclusive and gender-responsive entrepreneurship policies.

The discussions at the World Café events focused on five key themes: digital transformation, access to finance, challenges and rural entrepreneurship, invisible work, and entrepreneurial education. Insights were collected from over 75 stakeholders of the three involved countries, including public authorities, NGOs, and women entrepreneurs. The analysis is based on the data collected during the National World Café events, focusing on five key thematic areas related to women's entrepreneurship. The analysis aims to assess the effectiveness of existing policies and programs, identify structural and systemic barriers, and formulate policy recommendations to improve support mechanisms and foster a more enabling environment for women entrepreneurs.

Across all five thematic areas examined, the study identifies a consistent pattern: the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are shaped by structural and gendered

¹ To learn more about the project, visit: <https://refem.eu/>

inequalities embedded within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Data from Hungary, Romania, and Spain reveal that women encounter distinct barriers, such as entrenched gender norms, reduced self-efficacy, and unequal access to capital, training, and networks, not typically experienced by men. These findings underscore the need for interventions that go beyond individual support and address the systemic conditions sustaining gender disparities in entrepreneurship.

Our findings include that 1) Digital transformation remains uneven, with women entrepreneurs needing more tailored training, peer support, and accessible digital tools; 2) Access to finance is hindered by systemic bias, low financial literacy, and a lack of tailored instruments. Many women-led businesses remain small due to a preference for autonomy over growth, 3) Rural women face unique constraints, including poor access to support services, social stigma, and infrastructural gaps, 4) Invisible work, such as caregiving and household duties, significantly limits women's time and resources for entrepreneurship; 5) Entrepreneurial education is often too theoretical, lacking gender-sensitive content and flexible formats suited to women's realities.

In regard to policy recommendations, the brief calls for a comprehensive, intersectional policy approach that combines targeted financial tools, digital and business training, inclusive support networks, and recognition of unpaid work. The recommended EU-level actions include gender-sensitive upskilling, modular financial literacy programmes, support for digital adoption, and mainstreaming gender in entrepreneurship policies. The recommended country-specific strategies urge national and regional actors to improve coordination, design locally adapted programmes, and include women entrepreneurs in policy-making processes.

1. Introduction

Despite women across Europe continuing to face persistent barriers in starting and sustaining businesses, more recent studies have shown a continuous global rise in the number of women engaging in entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent crises have significantly heightened the difficulties they

face in sustaining their businesses (Gergely et al. 2024). The European Union has responded with several strategic initiatives, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising the need for inclusive entrepreneurial policies. Recent reports highlight that nearly three-quarters of the “missing” entrepreneurs in the EU are women (OECD 2023; WEF 2023). This underscores the need to address systemic issues such as childcare access, work-life balance, limited access to finance, and insufficient digital inclusion for women entrepreneurs (WEs).

Dominant narratives about entrepreneurship often rely on masculine-coded ideals, such as risk-taking, competitiveness, and independence, that systematically marginalise women's entrepreneurial practices and discourage alternative business models (Ahl 2006). This narrow conceptualisation contributes to the underrepresentation and undervaluation of women entrepreneurs in mainstream policy and discourse (Bruni et al. 2004). Reframing women's entrepreneurship as a potential force for social transformation, rather than merely a subset of economic policy, opens new pathways for inclusive development (Calás et al. 2009). Persistent gender gaps are better understood not as reflections of women's individual deficits, but as the result of structural and institutional inequalities (Marlow and McAdam 2013). This perspective encourages a shift from individual-level solutions to broader systemic change. Accordingly, there is an urgent need for a gender-aware policy framework that recognises the embeddedness of women entrepreneurs in complex social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Brush et al. 2009). An intersectional lens is also essential, as gender rarely operates in isolation. Ethnicity, class, geography, and migration background all influence how women experience entrepreneurship (Verduijn and Essers 2013). Policies that fail to account for these overlapping inequalities risk reinforcing exclusion rather than remedying it. Effective policy must acknowledge this diversity and be designed to support women's actual lived realities, particularly those facing multiple forms of disadvantage, such as rural women, ethnic minorities, and informal sector workers.

The European Union has recognised the challenges WEs face, and recent EU policy documents call for more targeted actions to advance women's entrepreneurship. In

the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these efforts have intensified, acknowledging the need for dedicated measures and a comprehensive, inclusive entrepreneurial policy framework. The WEgate Policy Brief² advocates for a strategic, multi-level framework to support women entrepreneurs, especially those operating in sectors hardest hit by crises (WEgate, 2022). The European Skills Agenda and the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, as well as the newly adopted Roadmap for Women's Rights³ highlight the importance of improving women's access to training in digital and green economy sectors, supporting entrepreneurial skill development, and fostering stronger networks.

This paper aims to explore country-level strategies and policy solutions addressing the specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, as well as the incentives and support mechanisms currently in place to promote their business activities. The research focuses on assessing the effectiveness of existing policies and programmes through the active engagement of policy stakeholders. Based on the empirical data collected, we formulate evidence-based recommendations to enhance policy and practice supporting women's entrepreneurship. The countries selected for analysis are Hungary, Spain (with a particular focus on the Andalusia region), and Romania.

The paper is organised into the following chapters. Chapter 2 introduces the results of a mapping of the policy landscape in the three target countries. Then, Chapter 3 investigates how the existing policies and programmes support WEs in practice. The analysis employs a structured approach to stakeholder engagement, establishing a policy dialogue with a diverse group of actors, including professional associations, chambers of commerce, academic experts, and representatives of public institutions. Lastly, Chapter 4, drawing on the findings introduced in Chapter 3, presents targeted recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. The recommendations aim to

² Access to the Policy Brief: <https://community.wegate.eu/news-events/news/check-out-our-first-policy-brief-%E2%80%9Ctoward-strategic-policy-framework-women>

³ Access to strategies: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en

enhance the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies and programmes that support women's entrepreneurship, thereby contributing to more inclusive and resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems.

1.1 Methodology employed for data collection

The first phase of data collection involved desk research to map and review existing policies, programmes, and national strategies aimed at supporting women's entrepreneurship in each of the three countries. The objective was to create a contextual foundation for understanding the policy landscape and identifying gaps. To complement the desk research and capture diverse, practice-based insights, deliberative discussions were organised using the World Café method, one in each country (Hungary, Romania, and Spain). This participatory method is widely used in empirical research and policy development to facilitate collaborative thinking, share knowledge, and generate concrete recommendations (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Gáspár et al., 2014)

The specific aims of the World Café sessions (small-group discussions) organised in the three involved countries were to collect data and insights directly from stakeholders for policy recommendations. Each discussion within the World Café events focused on five thematic areas relevant to women entrepreneurs:

1. Digital Transformation
2. Investment and Growth, Access to Finance
3. Challenges in Entrepreneurship for Women, with a Focus on Rural Women and sectors where women are underrepresented
4. Invisible Work and Women Entrepreneurship
5. Entrepreneurial Education for Women

The discussions explored challenges, identified good practices, assessed the adequacy of current policies, and formulated recommendations. Table hosts facilitated each group to ensure continuity, summarise the discussions, and guide participants through the questions. At the end of each World Café event, key findings

were shared in a plenary session, where participants refined and prioritised recommendations. Table hosts documented insights in written reports, including discussion summaries, group dynamics, and identified policy suggestions. These reports served as primary data sources for drafting this policy brief.

Table 1. Overview of Stakeholder Engagement Events

Hungarian World Café	16 April 2025, Budapest	25 participants from eight organisations, including public institutions, universities, training providers, and grassroots enterprise support initiatives.
Romanian World Café	22 May 2025, Miercurea Ciuc	26 participants from ten organisations, including public institutions, universities, training providers, and grassroots enterprise support initiatives.
Spanish World Café	21 May 2025, Cádiz	25 participants from areas representing entrepreneurship, universities, training, innovation and public institutions.

2. Overview of Country-Level Policy Frameworks

2.1 Hungary

The policy environment supporting entrepreneurship in Hungary has evolved through several strategic and legislative instruments that indirectly or directly reflect the needs of WEs. Hungary does not have a single, comprehensive national policy solely dedicated to women's entrepreneurship. Instead, WEs are recognised and supported as a distinct target group within broader SME strategies and action plans. In this way, the strategies and legislation promote measures that can benefit them within the broader SME and economic development strategy.

There are, however, a few dedicated programmes, like mentoring programmes targeting disadvantaged WEs. These programs usually provide financial support, competence development, mentoring, and network-building opportunities. In addition to state support, there are also other programmes which, although not

regular and rather project-based, also contribute to supporting WEs, such as the Visa She's Next, AWE Hungary and EU-funded projects like RE-FEM, Womenture⁴, Capsule⁵.

The overall picture shows that the policy framework rather indirectly supports women entrepreneurs, and while practical support exists and is maintained through targeted national programmes, the ecosystem supporting WEs is rather limited and fragmented. In addition to the state programmes, EU-funded projects and international initiatives provide more targeted support, often to specific subgroups within the broader group of WEs.

Table 2: Overview of the policy framework supporting (women) entrepreneurship in Hungary

Policy Document	Period	Document Type	Relation to Women Entrepreneurs
The strategy for strengthening the Hungarian micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (2019–2030) ⁶	2019-2030	Strategy, Action Plan	Identifies and proposes measures supporting women-led enterprises, though not as a standalone policy instrument.
Act XXXIV of 2004 about small and medium-sized enterprises and their development support	2004/ongoing	Legislation	Provides a legislative foundation for SME development, with indirect synergy effects benefiting women-led businesses.
1517/2021. (VII. 30.) Government Resolution	2021–2024	Strategy	Focuses on restarting the economy and supporting MSMEs, including synergistic effects for women-led enterprises.
1612/2023. (XII. 28.)	2024–2025	Strategy	Highlights business development

⁴ More on the Womenture project: <https://womenture.eu/>

⁵ More on the Capsule project: <https://impacthub.ro/en/programe-pentru-antreprenori/capsule/>

⁶ <https://www.edutus.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/KKV-Strategia-2019-2030.pdf>

Government Resolution			measures that may also support women entrepreneurs, although without exclusive focus.
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Table 3: Overview of the national programmes and initiatives supporting women entrepreneurs

Hiventures	Established by the Hungarian government. It offers financing solutions to startups and entrepreneurs through various programs, including pre-seed, seed, and growth funding. While not exclusively for women, Hiventures provides significant support to WEs seeking capital for their ventures.
GINOP PLUSZ-1.1.1-22-2022-00001: Provision of targeted business development services for micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises	Offers targeted business development services, consultancy vouchers, and sustainability mentoring, helping entrepreneurs, WEs among them, navigate available resources and strengthen managerial capabilities.
VOSZPort – GINOP-1.1.9-VEKOP-20	Focuses on the digital transition of SMEs, providing an integrated platform to improve financial management and customer relationship practices.
GINOP Plusz-1.1.4-24	Supports startups with consultancy, training, and knowledge expansion
DIMOP Plusz-1.2.7 and DIMOP Plusz-1.2.4	Facilitate digitalisation and the adoption of advanced technologies like AI and big data.
Entrepreneur Start II Program	Provided foundational entrepreneurial training and start-up capital (closed for new applicants in 2023)
SEED Foundation's "DOBBANTÓ" Women Entrepreneurs' Competence Development Program	The program aimed to expand women's financial knowledge and focuses on developing entrepreneurial skills and competencies. The core elements of the program are the twelve-day competency development training and open club events available to everyone. The SEED Foundation has been running the program for 14 years with the support of Budapest Bank. Not running currently.

RajtUp – Step onto the "I Achieve My Goals" Field! – Business Support and Growth Program	Modular business development program open to all, but also used by women entrepreneurs.
The SEED Foundation's upcoming mentoring programme starting from 2025 / under GINOP Plusz	The programme is aimed at supporting disadvantaged WEs.

2.2 Romania (Transylvania)

The policy environment supporting entrepreneurship in Romania has gradually developed through various strategic frameworks and programs that acknowledge WEs as an important, yet not always distinct, group within the broader SME ecosystem. Unlike some countries, Romania does not currently have a comprehensive national policy exclusively dedicated to women's entrepreneurship. Instead, WEs are typically included as a priority segment within wider SME development and digitalisation strategies.

While the Romanian government has introduced several initiatives to foster entrepreneurship, dedicated programs specifically targeting WEs remain limited and fragmented. Much of the support for women-led businesses is delivered through European Union-funded projects, non-governmental organisations, and regional development programs rather than through a unified national strategy.

Table 4: Overview of the Policy Framework Supporting Entrepreneurship in Romania

Policy Document	Period	Document Type	Relation to Women Entrepreneurs
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National Strategy for SMEs 2021-2027 ⁷	2021-2027	Strategy, Action Plan	Recognises the importance of inclusive entrepreneurship but lacks explicit, dedicated measures solely for WEs. Emphasises digital transformation and SME growth with indirect benefits for women-led businesses.
Romanian Government's Digitalisation Strategy ⁸ (2021-2027)	2021-2027	Strategy Plan	Promotes digital tools adoption among SMEs, with some focus on addressing gender gaps in digital skills, but implementation for WEs remains limited.
National Plan for Gender Equality 2024-2027 ⁹	2021-2025	Policy Framework	Addresses gender gaps across sectors, including employment and entrepreneurship. Encourages women's economic empowerment, yet concrete entrepreneurial programs are sparse.
Law on SMEs and Start-ups (OUG 6/2011, amended) ¹⁰	Since 2011, ongoing	Legislation	Provides the legal foundation for SME development. Does not specifically address WEs but creates the general framework within which they operate.

In Romania, several national programmes and initiatives support WEs, though not always in a coordinated or gender-sensitive manner. The RO Startup Nation programme stands as a flagship government initiative offering grants to start-ups and SMEs, including women-led businesses. However, it does not provide dedicated support or training tailored specifically to the needs of WEs. Additionally, European

⁷ https://economie.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SNC-2021-2027-anexe_2023_04_26-FINAL.pdf

⁸ https://www.eib.org/attachments/lucalli/20230198_digitalisation_of_smes_in_romania_en.pdf

⁹ <https://www.dnsc.ro/vezi/document/dnsc-gender-equality>

¹⁰ <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/126074>

Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund projects have launched numerous entrepreneurship, digital skills, and innovation initiatives. These often include targeted calls prioritising women, especially in disadvantaged or rural areas.

Non-governmental organisations such as Femei în Afaceri and the Romanian Women's Business Association play an essential role through mentorship and networking programmes aimed at empowering women. These efforts are frequently co-financed by the EU. Regional development agencies also offer business support and training that sometimes includes WEs as a focus group, although the coverage and quality of support remain uneven across different parts of the country.

The broader ecosystem is marked by several key characteristics and challenges. Traditional gender roles and cultural norms remain particularly strong in Romania, especially in rural areas. Societal expectations continue to place the burden of household and caregiving responsibilities on women, making it difficult for them to fully engage in entrepreneurial activities. While urban and highly educated populations may see a more balanced division of labour, rural women often shoulder both unpaid care and business responsibilities simultaneously.

Access and mobility constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Women in rural regions struggle to travel to urban centres where most training and support programmes are based. Their participation is often limited by time constraints and family obligations, which make it difficult to attend longer, or paid, courses. Moreover, the support ecosystem is fragmented. Unlike in Hungary, Romania lacks a coordinated national-level strategy with dedicated resources for WEs. Support is dispersed among a variety of short-term projects and NGOs, resulting in inconsistent access and limited long-term impact.

2.3 Spain (Andalusia)

Andalusia has an active institutional support ecosystem, which offers training, advice on equality, financial support and resources adapted to the rural and digital context. However, its scope remains limited in the face of unmet structural needs: access to

gender-sensitive financing, advanced training in digital and technological skills, sustainable mentoring networks and more ambitious reconciliation policies.

Table 5: Overview of the Policy Framework Supporting Entrepreneurship in Andalusia

Policy Document	Period	Document Type	Relation to Women Entrepreneurs
Law 12/2007 on Gender Equality in Andalusia ¹¹	Since 2007	Regional Law	Establishes the legal obligation to integrate a gender perspective in all public policies, including entrepreneurship and economic development.
Law 9/2018 on Social Services in Andalusia ¹²	Since 2018	Regional Law	Recognises care services as key to supporting women's economic autonomy and work-life balance.
III Strategic Plan for Gender Equality in Andalusia (2022–2028) ¹³	2022–2028	Regional Strategic Plan	Includes specific actions for promoting women's entrepreneurship, digital transition, and sectoral inclusion.
Organic Law 3/2007 for Effective Equality (Spain) ¹⁴	Since 2007	National Law	Framework law for gender equality; applies to all regions, including Andalusia.
Spanish Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan (NextGenEU) ¹⁵	2021–2026	EU-funded National Plan	Funds digitalisation, innovation, and gender-sensitive entrepreneurship through regional initiatives

¹¹ <https://www.boe.es/eli/es-an/l/2007/11/26/12/con>

¹² <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/servicios/publicaciones/detalle/80285.html>

¹³chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/institutodelamujer/files/PlanEstrategico/PEIMH_2022_2028.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/2007/03/22/3/con>

¹⁵chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/temas/fondos-recuperacion/Documents/30042021-Plan_Recuperacion_%20Transformacion_%20Resiliencia.pdf

Table 6: Programmes and resources at the regional level (Andalusia)

Programme /Resource and Promoting Entity	Description
Guide to Grants and Incentives. Andalucía Emprende	Monthly-updated compilation of grants, loans, employment incentives, and support services for women entrepreneurs.
Financing via Bank Agreements. Andalucía Emprende	Facilitates access to micro-credits tailored to the needs of self-employed women and women-led SMEs.
Business Equality Advisory Service. Andalusian Women's Institute (IAM)	Free technical guidance for the design and implementation of gender equality plans in companies.
EQUIPA Platform. Andalusian Women's Institute (IAM)	Online training on gender equality, gender-based violence prevention, and entrepreneurship with a gender perspective.
PREPARADAS Programme. Junta de Andalucía, Employment Department	Face-to-face training in employability and digital entrepreneurship for unemployed women, especially in rural areas.
Catalogue of Business Initiative Accelerators (2025). Andalucía Emprende	Comprehensive list of acceleration programmes in Andalusia to support the growth and consolidation of business initiatives.

Table 7: National level programmes applicable in Andalusia

Programme /Resource and Promoting Entity	Description
PAEM. Business Support Programme for Women. Women's Institute and Chambers of	Personalised advice and comprehensive support to launch or consolidate business projects led by women.

Commerce	
Rural Women Challenge. Women's Institute	Training, mentoring, and access to digital tools are designed for women entrepreneurs in rural environments.
Juana Millán School. Women's Foundation / Women's Institute	Specialised training programme for women in the early stages of entrepreneurship.
Professional Woman / Businesswoman Award. Caixabank	Annual recognition for outstanding women entrepreneurs, accompanied by a financial award and national visibility
Coca-Cola Women TOUR. Coca-Cola Foundation / Alma Natura Foundation	Online mentoring programme for rural women entrepreneurs, including training on business model development and access to seed funding.

In this context, the sustainability of WE in Andalusia depends to a large extent on integrated public policies that combine financial inclusion, digitalisation, work-life balance and female representation in strategic sectors.

3. Perspectives of Stakeholders and Policymakers on Women Entrepreneurs: Reflections, Identified Needs, and Recommendations for Enhanced Support

Across all the 5 thematic areas explored for this study, a unifying pattern emerges: regardless of the specific topic under discussion, the challenges faced by WEs are fundamentally shaped by the broader structural and gendered frameworks in which entrepreneurship operates. Data collected from all three countries consistently reveal that WEs encounter a range of barriers that are distinctly gender-specific and not typically experienced by their male counterparts. These barriers include deeply entrenched social expectations regarding gender roles, reduced self-efficacy influenced by societal norms, and unequal access to critical resources such as

financial capital, entrepreneurship education, and professional networks. These findings highlight the systemic nature of the obstacles women face in entrepreneurial contexts, suggesting that interventions must address not only individual capacities but also the structural conditions that reproduce gender inequality in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

3.1 Digital Transformation

Digitalization emerged as a highly relevant and timely topic, generating significant interest and engagement among participants. A main finding is that digitalisation presents a dual reality for WEs, functioning both as a significant opportunity and a persistent challenge. While digital tools, particularly in online marketing, are increasingly seen as essential for competitiveness and visibility, their broader application in business operations remains limited. Women entrepreneurs often lack the confidence, resources, or training needed to fully integrate digital solutions into their enterprises.

Participants widely acknowledged that digital tools are essential for enhancing business visibility, improving competitiveness, and increasing operational efficiency. There was a shared understanding that digitalisation is no longer a supplementary asset, but a critical enabler of business resilience, innovation, and long-term growth. However, while WEs frequently make use of digital marketing tools, their broader integration of digital business processes remains limited. This limitation is largely attributed to gaps in digital literacy, insufficient technical skills, and a lack of gender-sensitive, tailored support.

Across all countries, the need for practical, hands-on digital training, particularly designed for women, and especially those in rural areas, was strongly emphasised. Stakeholders stressed that digital capacity-building should go beyond basic training to include expert guidance and supportive policy frameworks that facilitate inclusive digital integration. A central theme in relation to digital literacy from all three countries is the need for practical, accessible, and context-sensitive digital training. Participants advocated for hybrid learning formats, peer-led learning spaces, and

mentoring programmes, especially by women experts, to build skills in areas such as AI, social media, e-commerce, and automation.

A consistent issue identified in all three countries was the disconnect between national digitalisation strategies and the lived realities of WEs. Existing public policies were often seen as overly general, inadequately gender-sensitive, and lacking in actionable support mechanisms. Stakeholders also highlighted structural obstacles, including excessive bureaucracy, outdated legal frameworks, and the high cost of digital tools. In Spain and Hungary, participants emphasised that public digitalisation policies often overlook the real constraints of small, women-led businesses, such as limited funding, caregiving duties, and technological unfamiliarity.

One of the most pressing barriers stressed across all contexts was the lack of access to targeted, ongoing, and context-specific digital training. This challenge was particularly acute in rural areas, where structural inequalities intersect with technological exclusion. The absence of continuous, practice-oriented learning opportunities limits both the digital engagement and self-efficacy of women entrepreneurs. As a counterbalance, stakeholders across the three countries strongly advocated for peer learning platforms, digital communities, and mentoring programmes led by experienced WEs. In Hungary, it was particularly highlighted that alongside governmental action, the role of NGOs and the private sector is critical. Participants proposed the establishment of entrepreneurial networks and business hubs dedicated to supporting digital transformation. These networks should promote peer learning, knowledge exchange, and collaboration around the challenges of digitalisation. The inclusion of digital experts within these platforms was seen as essential to offer practical, hands-on guidance for integrating digital solutions into everyday business operations.

Table 8: Key topics emerged during the table discussions on digital transition¹⁶

Hungary	<p>1) Limited use of digital tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digitalisation is primarily applied in online marketing - Need to improve digital literacy and capacity among women entrepreneurs <p>2) Need for an integrated digital state and legal reform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Current regulations misaligned with digital processes - Need to automate administrative tasks - Legal updates could reduce bureaucracy and support innovation <p>3) Role of NGOs and the private sector</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Importance of creating entrepreneurial networks and business hubs - Promotion of peer learning and collaboration - Inclusion of digital experts in network groups for practical, hands-on support <p>4) Strong demand for practical, hybrid-format digital training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training on specific digital tools and their business applications - Emphasis on daily integration of digital solutions - Goal: build confidence and digital competence for WEs <p>5) Need for networking opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of virtual and in-person communities - Sharing of experiences, best practices, and expert advice - Support for ongoing digital adoption <p>6) Increased focus on data security and cybersecurity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low initial awareness among participants - Need for education and resources on cybersecurity to protect data
Romania	<p>1) Digital Tools & AI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - WEs in Romania see digital tools, especially AI, as vital for business visibility and competitiveness, though adoption is uneven and sometimes met with fear or skepticism. <p>2) Key Barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited access to tailored training (especially in rural areas) - Fear of automation, and low confidence in digital content creation hinder progress. <p>3) Support Needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a strong demand for accessible, practical training on AI, digital

¹⁶ Due to space constraints, a more detailed presentation of the World Café discussions is not feasible. Instead, this paper provides a thematic summary of the key issues raised during the events.

	<p>marketing, and social media, along with peer learning opportunities.</p> <p>4) Policy Gaps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Current national strategies don't fully address gender-specific digital needs - Suggestions include tax incentives and policies supporting ongoing digital upskilling. <p>5) Empowerment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More women role models and leadership in digital sectors are needed to inspire confidence and participation.
Spain	<p>1) Key challenges identified</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mismatch between policies and needs of WEs, especially those with limited resources and caregiving duties. - Bureaucratic delays and pre-financing requirements make public support inaccessible for many. - High costs of digital tools and services, coupled with limited digital training, especially among women from analogue work backgrounds. - Stereotypes related to gender and age undermine confidence and access to tech. <p>2) Need for improving digital literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mentoring, practical training, and sector-specific incubators are needed. - Policies must be more flexible, well-funded, and socially responsive. - Existing programmes (e.g., Digital Kit) are useful but under-resourced and poorly communicated.

3.2 Investment and Growth, and Accessing Finance

In regards of the topic of the finance, investment and growth, our findings highlights the persistent institutional barriers that shape women's access to finance and investment across Hungary, Romania, and Spain. While women entrepreneurs in all three contexts demonstrate considerable agency, innovation, and commitment to autonomy, their business trajectories are significantly shaped by a complex interplay of risk aversion, undercapitalization, and systemic exclusion from mainstream financial ecosystems. Despite their growing presence in entrepreneurship, women remain underserved by current financial systems and support structures.

A key cross-country finding is the shared pattern of risk-averse entrepreneurial behavior among women, often rooted in broader social expectations and the prioritization of work-life balance. Women entrepreneurs frequently prefer stable, small-scale enterprises over high-growth, investment-driven models. This preference is not solely individual, but deeply influenced by gendered societal norms and the types of sectors women tend to operate in, often those perceived as "feminine," lower-capital, and undervalued (e.g., crafts, education, health and personal care). Across all three countries, participants described difficulties accessing both public and private funding, citing bureaucratic rigidity, delays, lack of transparency, and gender bias in institutional interactions.

Moreover, significant gaps in financial literacy and investment readiness were reported in all three countries, particularly concerning risk assessment, strategic planning, and navigating different financing mechanisms. Many women start businesses with personal savings or informal support, avoiding formal financial channels due to fear of debt, loss of control over their ownership, or complex application processes. In Hungary and Romania, this is compounded by internalised doubts and gendered expectations that equate entrepreneurship with personal autonomy rather than high-growth ambition. In relation to it, participants of the World Cafes consistently expressed a need for step-by-step, modular training that accommodates diverse starting points, including informal businesses, self-employment, and enterprises operating outside high-growth sectors.

Existing support structures, including public funding schemes and entrepreneurship programmes, were commonly described as ill-aligned with women's realities. Many policies are perceived as one-size-fits-all, inflexible, and often inaccessible to women, especially those in rural areas, those re-entering the workforce, or those operating outside of dominant economic sectors. WEs continue to face bias from financial institutions, including stricter requirements, scepticism from investors, and unequal treatment compared to their male counterparts. Simultaneously, public funding mechanisms are often mismatched with the realities of small, women-led businesses,

and delayed subsidies, rigid eligibility criteria, and bureaucratic hurdles are common complaints.

Cultural norms and caregiving roles often push women to prioritise stability and flexibility over proactive scaling. This leads to a scarcity of investment-ready, women-led ventures, particularly in higher-value sectors like ICT or health tech, where women remain underrepresented. Meanwhile, "traditionally feminine" sectors such as crafts or education are poorly supported for innovation.

In all three countries, discussions highlighted that there is a shared disconnect between national strategies and the needs of WEs. Policies often lack gender sensitivity, and women, especially those in rural or minority communities, are excluded from both programme benefits and decision-making processes. The lack of coordination among support schemes and poor communication further hinders uptake. In Romania, language barriers and the absence of inclusive communication further exclude ethnic minorities and underrepresented groups.

Table 9: Key topics emerged during the table discussions on Investment and Growth, and Accessing Finance

Hungary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) External and internal bias: Women face scepticism from funders and self-doubt about investment-readiness. 2) Low financial literacy, especially around loans vs. equity; low confidence in pitching ideas. 3) Male-dominated investment ecosystem undervalues women-led businesses. 4) Risk aversion and preference for flexibility over rapid growth limit investment-readiness. 5) Limited pipeline of scalable women-led businesses contributes to low investment levels. 6) Sectors with low capital needs (e.g. cosmetics, sewing) attract little investor interest. 7) Public procurement and grants often overlook women-led businesses. 8) Lack of centralised information on support programmes and tools. 9) Older women are overlooked in entrepreneurship support frameworks. 10) Need for tailored training on finance, legal compliance, and investment-readiness.
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Romania	<p>1) Low engagement with funding due to lack of trust, systemic support, and financial literacy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited awareness of funding opportunities; complex and inaccessible application processes. - Most women self-finance, limiting growth and innovation. - Lack of investment culture and reluctance to share ownership with external investors. - Knowledge gaps in financial planning, investment-readiness, and risk management. - Language and digital literacy barriers, especially for rural and ethnic minority women. - High-value sectors (ICT, tech agriculture) are underrepresented among women entrepreneurs. <p>2) Needs identified</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Step-by-step training: From self-employment basics to investment literacy. - Micro-grants/loans with simplified access for small-scale needs. - Support for first-time hiring, digitalisation, and product innovation. - Develop a comprehensive national policy for WEs. - Simplify bureaucracy, improve communication, and increase women's visibility in policymaking.
Spain	<p>1) Limited access to funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women face distrust from financial institutions, excessive guarantees, and unequal treatment compared to men. - Self-financing is common, increasing financial risk for women entrepreneurs. - Public funding schemes are misaligned with real business needs: slow, complex, and poorly communicated. <p>2) Need for tailored support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support for internationalisation, innovation, and long-term development. - Demand for subsidised trade fair access, better marketing and export training, and links with embassies and trade networks. <p>3) Supportive network</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Innovation requires both funding and a supportive institutional culture. - Public administrations should simplify access to funding, improve communication, and involve women entrepreneurs in policy design.

3.3 Challenges in Entrepreneurship for Women: Focus on Rural Areas and Underrepresented Sectors

A recurring theme and also a specific topic throughout the discussions on entrepreneurship was the structural and cultural context that shapes women's engagement in business, particularly in rural areas. In these settings, entrepreneurship was presented as frequently necessity-driven, emerging not from entrepreneurial ambition or innovation but from a lack of viable employment alternatives for women. A shared theme was that entrepreneurship for rural women is often born out of necessity, not opportunity, due to limited job options and inflexible employment structures. This pattern is particularly evident in Hungary and Romania, where rural women often turn to self-employment as a survival strategy in the face of limited job opportunities and saturated local markets.

All three countries underscore a critical mismatch between existing entrepreneurship support programs and the specific needs and lived realities of rural women. Current initiatives often fail to address the geographic, cultural, and infrastructural constraints that rural women face (e.g., lack of finance for traveling). Moreover, there is a pronounced deficiency in locally accessible mentoring, networking, and tailored training opportunities, which further limits women's capacity to develop sustainable businesses. In this context, peer-led entrepreneurial networks are often viewed as more effective and accessible than formal, institutional support mechanisms.

Participants from Hungary and Romania emphasised that rural entrepreneurship support must be better adapted to real-life conditions. This includes simplified access to microgrants, practical and localised training, and stronger mentoring networks. Many women expressed the need for professional guidance not only in business development but also in confidence-building, assertiveness, and visibility. Podcast-based outreach, on-site workshops, and digital education were highlighted as effective formats.

The role of local governments emerged as a particularly salient factor. While proactive and partnership-based approaches were identified as vital for fostering trust and

collaboration, the experiences of rural women in Hungary and Romania reveal significant mistrust towards municipal authorities. The experience of reluctance to engage with local institutions due to perceptions of inadequate or ineffective support was reported.

A country-specific finding from Romania draws attention to linguistic exclusion as a barrier to entrepreneurship: language proficiency, including proficiency in Romanian, was identified as a significant obstacle to accessing financial services and market opportunities among ethnic minority women. The findings from Spain, by contrast, broadens the analytical lens beyond rurality to address women's underrepresentation in technical and male-dominated sectors such as STEM, maritime industries, and agriculture.

Across countries, participants called for values-based education, more visible female role models, and stronger public policy measures to support work-life balance, such as childcare near workplaces and tax incentives for caregiving. There was also demand for more inclusive policy design, integrating rural and sectoral perspectives and moving beyond the one-size-fits-all approach.

Table 10: Key topics emerged during the table discussions on Challenges, with a focus on Rural Areas and Underrepresented Sectors

Hungary	<p>1) Entrepreneurship by necessity: Many rural women start businesses due to lack of flexible job opportunities, not out of opportunity or innovation.</p> <p>2) Misleading perception: Entrepreneurship is often seen as flexible, but managing a business adds to existing household responsibilities.</p> <p>3) Interesting dynamics in rural communities: Positive word-of-mouth stabilizes existing businesses but limits competition. Post-pandemic rural newcomers formed their own supportive networks.</p> <p>4) Weak ties to municipalities: Participants avoid local authorities and don't expect rural-specific support from the state.</p> <p>5) Need for business networks: Desire for peer networks and expert advisors for strategy, digital skills, and marketing.</p>
Romania	<p>1) Dual burden: Rural women face time constraints due to combining business with household and caregiving duties.</p> <p>2) Limited access to finance, training, and business networks compared to</p>

	<p>urban women.</p> <p>3) Barriers include language limitations, rigid grant conditions, lack of collateral, and weak local support structures.</p> <p>4) Local support is inconsistent; some municipalities help, others discourage innovation.</p> <p>5) Policy issues: National frameworks exist but do not address rural-specific challenges; current “one size fits all” approach seen as ineffective.</p>
Spain	<p>1) Women remain underrepresented in leadership and technical sectors (e.g., STEM, agriculture, fisheries).</p> <p>2) Patriarchal norms persist, even in women-majority workplaces</p> <p>3) Women often face dismissal, marginalisation, and lack of recognition in professional settings.</p> <p>4) Lack of visible female role models limits aspirations.</p> <p>5) Care work is undervalued, hindering women's career growth</p> <p>6) Education identified as key to long-term change; participants called for early, values-based gender equality education.</p>

3.4 Invisible Work and Women Entrepreneurship

Across all three countries studied, there is broad consensus that the burden of invisible domestic and caregiving work significantly constrains women's ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Unpaid domestic responsibilities (such as childcare, eldercare, and household management) disproportionately fall on women, limiting their time, energy, and capacity to invest in the development, growth, and management of their businesses. These constraints are deeply rooted in persistent gender roles and societal expectations, which continue to assign caregiving and domestic responsibilities primarily to women, as strengthened by the World Cafe participants in all three countries.

Invisible work emerges as a structural barrier that not only impedes women's entrepreneurial potential but also reinforces broader patterns of gender inequality. In particular, the Romanian context is characterized by deeply entrenched traditional norms, especially in rural areas, where caregiving and household tasks are regarded as inherently female duties. While such cultural rigidity is less explicitly emphasized in

case of Hungary and Spain, gendered divisions of labour remain a shared reality across all three contexts.

Importantly, although unpaid domestic work is burdensome, it also equips women with a set of transferable skills (such as multitasking, budgeting, time management, and problem-solving) which sometimes become the basis for business ideas. However, without institutional support, these efforts often remain unsustainable. This dual nature of invisible work, as both a constraint and a potential resource, was acknowledged by stakeholders in all three countries. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed this dynamic: while it created some space for innovation and remote work, it also increased care demands and reduced women's ability to invest in their businesses.

Policy responses emphasized that invisible work must be made visible through recognition, financial compensation, and institutional support. Participants consistently emphasized the need for systemic interventions aimed at alleviating women's domestic burdens. Recommended measures include access to affordable and quality public care services, childcare vouchers, the promotion of women-led care enterprises, and comprehensive work-life balance policies. Community-based solutions, such as peer support networks and local cooperative initiatives, were also seen as essential to easing women's time constraints.

Table 11: Key topics emerged during the table discussions on Invisible Work

Hungary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Invisible work drains time and energy from women entrepreneurs and needs recognition and potential compensation. 2) Skills from unpaid work can inspire entrepreneurial ideas, as seen in examples like turning ironing into a franchise. 3) The COVID-19 pandemic had mixed effects: it demotivated some but also led others to monetize household tasks. 4) Remote work temporarily helped women balance jobs and businesses, but the return to office threatens these gains. 5) There is a need for state-supported mentoring programs and services to ease domestic burdens. E.g., A coupon system to subsidize household/childcare services and support women-led businesses. 6) Community-based solutions, like shared childcare logistics, to reduce individual
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	strain.
Romania	<p>1) Unpaid care and domestic work largely falls on rural women, rooted in traditional gender norms.</p> <p>2) This “invisible work” limits their time, energy, and focus for entrepreneurship.</p> <p>3) Skills from unpaid work (e.g. multitasking, budgeting) can support business success.</p> <p>4) Many rural women start businesses out of necessity, not opportunity.</p> <p>5) Entrepreneurship's promised flexibility often clashes with household responsibilities.</p> <p>6) Participants called for policies and support (e.g. care services, financial aid) to ease this dual burden and make women's entrepreneurship more sustainable.</p>
Spain	<p>1) Unpaid care and domestic work disproportionately affect women, limiting their time, well-being, and business growth.</p> <p>2) Invisible work restricts innovation, expansion, and efficient management of businesses.</p> <p>3) The pandemic intensified these burdens, forcing many women to reduce business activity.</p> <p>4) Participants stressed the need for: 1) Community support networks, 2) Accessible public care services</p> <p>5) Called for policy recognition of unpaid work's economic and social value, with decent pensions and social benefits and awareness campaigns to highlight invisible work</p> <p>6) Suggested regional and national governments to develop concrete measures and allocate resources to address structural barrier to women's entrepreneurship.</p>

3.5 Entrepreneurial Education for Women

Across Hungary, Romania, and Spain, participants agreed that entrepreneurial education plays a pivotal role in strengthening women-led businesses, particularly in contexts of crisis, rapid market changes. However, current education systems often fail to meet the specific, diverse, and evolving needs of WEs, especially in rural areas.

A key point of discussion among the Hungarian participants was whether training should be gender-specific. While some argued that separating educational content by gender risks reinforcing stereotypes, others contended that women face distinct challenges, from caregiving responsibilities and cultural expectations to underrepresentation in high-growth sectors, that justify tailored support. Ultimately,

there was consensus that education for WEs should address technical competencies and soft skills alike, while adapting content and format to women's lived realities.

Across all three countries, lack of access and flexibility emerged as a major barrier, particularly for rural women. In Romania and Hungary, participants emphasised that time constraints, travel difficulties, and childcare responsibilities limit rural women's ability to participate in training. Similarly, in Spain, many existing programmes were seen as inflexible, not gender-sensitive, or focused too narrowly on early-stage entrepreneurs, leaving out those who need ongoing support to innovate or scale.

Additionally, the format and delivery of entrepreneurial education emerged as a critical consideration. Participants called for more accessible, modular, and practical learning formats, including microlearning (podcasts, short videos), online and hybrid courses, and mobile outreach to rural communities. These should be designed with women's daily routines and multitasking needs in mind. Real-life case studies and problem-solving workshops were particularly valued as ways to bridge the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world business practice.

Another shared priority was soft skill development, particularly confidence-building, communication, negotiation, and leadership. Many women internalise cultural messages that discourage risk-taking or self-promotion, and thus require educational environments that foster self-belief, resilience, and empowerment. Mentorship, especially from local or sector-specific female role models, and community-based peer learning networks were seen as vital tools for emotional reinforcement and business growth.

Across all contexts, there was a clear need for inclusive, lifelong learning approaches. Education should not only target aspiring entrepreneurs but also support those with established businesses to adapt to digitalisation, market shifts, and innovation demands. Participants from Spain stressed the importance of aligning education with current market needs, including finance, AI, digital marketing, and cybersecurity, while enhancing collaboration between universities, training institutions, and business networks.

Table 12: Key topics emerged during the table discussions
on entrepreneurial education

Hungary	<p>1) Debate on whether entrepreneurial education should be gender-specific or unified; concerns about reinforcing stereotypes vs. addressing women's unique challenges.</p> <p>2) The importance of soft skills (confidence, communication, resilience) and emotional support are as important as technical knowledge.</p> <p>3) Need for practical, accessible education using real-life case studies and flexible formats (podcasts, microlearning) to fit women's schedules.</p> <p>4) Training should be tailored to diverse groups (young women, mothers, older women) recognizing different barriers and needs.</p> <p>5) Community support, peer networks, and mentoring are vital for emotional and practical reinforcement. NGOs and women's associations play key roles.</p> <p>6) Examples of promising programs from Hungary highlight mentoring, networking, university integration, and school initiatives, but more systematic evaluation is needed of the programmes' impact</p> <p>7) Early entrepreneurship education and cultural shifts are necessary to change mindsets and challenge stereotypes about women entrepreneurs.</p>
Romania	<p>1) Rural WEs face limited access to formal entrepreneurial education due to travel, time, and financial constraints.</p> <p>2) Need for making training more accessible and flexible (short sessions, online/hybrid formats, microlearning), and localize training or use mobile units to overcome geographical barriers.</p> <p>3) Supportive, community-based learning with mentorship and peer networks to build confidence and reduce isolation</p> <p>4) Need to bridge gap between theory and practice with experiential learning (case studies, workshops, problem-solving).</p> <p>5) Barriers include childcare duties and rigid schedules, requiring flexible timing and support systems.</p>
Spain	<p>1) Continuous, tailored training is crucial for WEs' resilience, especially during crises.</p> <p>2) Key skill gaps include finance, digital tech, marketing, leadership, and strategic planning.</p> <p>3) Existing programs often lack flexibility, gender focus, and accessibility, mainly targeting new entrepreneurs.</p> <p>4) More collaboration between education, incubators, and businesses is needed for practical, relevant training.</p> <p>5) Need for better information sharing</p> <p>6) Need for sector-specific training, support for participation, and spaces for peer</p>

	learning.
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4. Implications for Policy and Practice. Policy measures for better supporting women entrepreneurs

Drawing on stakeholder engagement conducted in Romania, Spain (Andalusia), and Hungary, our study identifies both shared and context-specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, alongside suggestions for policy and practice. Across the country-specific contexts, we found that women entrepreneurs encounter persistent structural barriers, including restricted access to finance, concentration in lower value-added sectors, digitalisation gaps, and the disproportionate burden of invisible domestic and caregiving work. The discussions highlighted that these challenges are particularly pronounced for rural women, older women re-entering the workforce, and those operating micro-enterprises in economically disadvantaged regions. Participants emphasised that while some supportive measures exist, they often remain fragmented, insufficiently targeted, or inaccessible due to rigid eligibility criteria and complex administrative procedures.

The evidence gathered underscores that enhancing women's entrepreneurship cannot rely solely on isolated interventions or generic SME policies. Instead, a comprehensive and gender-responsive approach is needed, one that combines tailored financial instruments, practical and locally accessible training opportunities, mentorship and peer learning networks. Stakeholders from all three countries strongly advocated for more inclusive policy design processes, involving women entrepreneurs directly to ensure that programmes reflect lived realities rather than top-down assumptions. Beyond policy tools, there is a need for cultural and narrative change that recognises the legitimacy and value of women-led businesses across all sectors, including technology and innovation.

In light of these findings, our recommendations aim to provide policymakers and practitioners with concrete, evidence-based strategies to build more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Digital Transformation

Women entrepreneurs need support for better integrating digital solutions into business processes. There is a clear demand for practical, accessible training and for business communities to share digital expertise.

European-level recommendations:

- Develop EU-funded, hands-on digital upskilling programmes tailored to women entrepreneurs, focusing on the use of digital tools in various business functions beyond marketing (e.g., podcasts, webinars, micro-courses).
- Support the creation of European-wide networks and mentoring communities that include digital experts, to provide day-to-day support to SMEs led by women.
- Raise awareness of data protection and cybersecurity through targeted training
- Create centralised, publicly accessible digital resource platforms.

Country-specific recommendations:

- For all 3 countries: support the creation of local and regional women entrepreneur networks, including digital mentors and experts to provide ongoing help in digital adoption.
- Hungary: Existing regulatory and public administration frameworks insufficiently support a fully digitalised entrepreneurial environment. Therefore, it is suggested to modernise and better integrate government e-services, reducing bureaucratic burdens.
- Romania: Expand access to practical digital skills training tailored to women entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas, with a focus on AI use, social media presence, and digital content creation.
- Romania: Develop a centralised digital platform to provide clear, up-to-date information on support programmes, funding, training, and networking opportunities.
- Spain: Fund incubators and accelerators with a gender and digital focus.
- Spain: Create centralised, publicly accessible digital resource platforms.
- Spain: Offer fiscal incentives for digital investment in women-led businesses.

Investment and Growth, Access to Finance

Women entrepreneurs often lack awareness of financial instruments, feel unprepared and unconfident to apply for funding, and often perceive growth as burdensome rather than as an opportunity. Many women entrepreneurs operate in low-capital sectors unattractive to investors. Their focus on small-scale or socially useful businesses further reduces their investment readiness.

European-level recommendations:

- Develop and implement modular, gender-sensitive financial literacy and investment readiness programmes across the EU.
- Promote a stepwise funding ecosystem (microloans → seed funding → venture capital) suited to women-led SMEs' typical growth trajectories.
- Promote multilingual, inclusive communication of EU funding opportunities, ensuring accessibility for women with limited language or digital skills.
- Support cross-border mentoring and peer-learning platforms that connect women entrepreneurs from different EU countries, fostering knowledge exchange in finance, innovation, and scaling strategies.

Country-specific recommendations:

- For all 3 countries: Improve the timing, dissemination, and relevance of public subsidies.
- Hungary: Create a digital platform for information about all public and private financing opportunities for women entrepreneurs.
- Hungary: Establish grant or guarantee schemes specifically supporting female founders in rural areas and in socially beneficial but lower-profit sectors (e.g., elderly care, cultural industries).
- Hungary: Introduce measures in public procurement and grant schemes giving preference to women-owned businesses, especially in underrepresented sectors.
- Romania: Create simplified micro-loan and micro-grant schemes tailored to small-scale, women-led businesses, especially in rural or traditional sectors (e.g., crafts, agriculture).
- Romania: Offer fiscal incentives for first-time hiring, digitalisation, or product innovation in women-owned businesses, especially in early-stage or informal contexts.

- Romania: Launch awareness campaigns and capacity-building programmes focused on financial literacy for underrepresented groups (e.g., ethnic minorities and rural women).
- Spain: Reform financing criteria to eliminate gender bias and streamline processes.
- Spain: Develop gender-responsive investment networks and mentorship programs.

Challenges in Entrepreneurship for Women, with Focus on Rural Women and Underrepresented Sectors

In rural regions, entrepreneurship is often not an opportunity but a necessity due to scarce flexible employment options. Social attitudes, local market limitations, and the burden of invisible work (unpaid domestic and care duties) further hinder women's entrepreneurial activity.

European-level recommendations:

- Support the establishment of rural women entrepreneur networks to exchange knowledge and best practices to overcome isolation.
- Fund EU projects encouraging entrepreneurship in sectors with low female participation (e.g., STEM, digital services).

Country-specific recommendations:

- For all 3 countries: Support local entrepreneurship networks to enable rural women to access mentors and share market information.
- Romania: Create simplified funding mechanisms with inclusive eligibility criteria tailored to the diversity of rural businesses.
- Romania: Launch awareness campaigns and leadership programmes to challenge gender stereotypes and build self-confidence among rural women.
- Romania: Provide funding for tailored business development initiatives and mentoring schemes that strengthen women-led enterprises and encourage digital transformation.
- Spain: Launch visibility campaigns for female leaders and experts.
- Spain: Guarantee gender parity in representative and advisory bodies.
- Spain: Strengthen labour inspections to prevent gender-based discrimination.

Invisible Work and Women Entrepreneurship

Unpaid domestic and care work continues to limit women's entrepreneurial potential, draining time and energy. Yet, these tasks can also inspire business ideas if recognised and supported.

European-level recommendations:

- Encourage social innovation programmes transforming invisible work into service-oriented entrepreneurship. Support pilot projects helping women convert care and household skills into businesses (e.g., cleaning, elderly care, small-scale catering).
- Foster public campaigns highlighting the economic value of care work.
- Fund inclusive training models that recognise and address invisible care work, such as through childcare support, flexible scheduling, and community-based delivery.

Country-specific recommendations:

- For all 3 countries: Promote family-friendly policy measures (e.g., care vouchers) to reduce women's unpaid work burden.
- Hungary: Explore a 'voucher' system, allowing families to access paid support for domestic and care work.
- Hungary: Increase public funding for NGOs supporting women in balancing family duties with entrepreneurship.
- Romania: Provide travel support and on-site childcare for women attending entrepreneurial training programmes.
- Romania: Organise local, practice-oriented training in rural areas through mobile units or community centres, focused on real-life business challenges and peer collaboration.
- Romania: Promote blended learning formats (online + in-person) that accommodate women's time constraints and caregiving responsibilities, making learning more accessible and flexible.
- Spain: Introduce fiscal incentives and supportive legislation for work-life reconciliation.
- Spain: Professionalise and fairly compensate care-related work.
- Spain: Include unpaid labour in official statistics and public discourse on entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial Education for Women

Women entrepreneurs need more than formal classroom training. They value confidence-building, mentorship, peer communities, and practical, real-life learning tools adapted to their daily routines.

European-level recommendations:

- Fund gender-sensitive entrepreneurial education programmes combining classic skills (finance, marketing) with self-confidence, resilience, and leadership training.
- Integrate entrepreneurship education into secondary curricula, presenting it as a realistic life path for all genders.

Country-specific recommendations:

- Hungary: Develop short, flexible educational content (e.g., podcasts, mobile-friendly micro-courses) adapted to women's daily schedules.
- Hungary: Develop tailored and gender-sensitive mentoring and coaching systems targeting women starting a business, especially in the first two years.
- Hungary: Include entrepreneurship and financial literacy modules in national school curricula.
- Hungary: Present diverse female role models, not only high achievers, in national campaigns and educational materials.
- Romania: Develop modular investment-readiness training programs with a step-by-step approach (from basic budgeting to investor engagement), focusing on women with low formal management experience.
- Spain: Design sector-specific, flexible training tailored to women business owners.
- Spain: Consolidate training opportunities through unified platforms.
- Spain: Encourage universities to co-create practical and interdisciplinary programs with business networks.

5. Discussion

The findings from stakeholder consultations in Hungary, Romania, and Spain point to a persistent and multifaceted set of barriers limiting women's entrepreneurial

potential. While these challenges are consistent with trends reported in the broader gender and entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Brush et al., 2019; OECD, 2021), the cross-country perspectives generated through the World Café process provide nuanced insights into how structural and cultural constraints intersect with women's lived realities.

One recurring theme concerns entrepreneurship education and support mechanisms. Debates among stakeholders reflected an unresolved tension between gender-specific and mainstream training. On one hand, targeted programmes can address confidence, sectoral barriers, and role model visibility; on the other, they risk reinforcing stereotypes if designed in isolation. This mirrors ongoing scholarly discussions on inclusive policy design, suggesting that hybrid approaches, embedding gender sensitivity in mainstream curricula while offering optional targeted modules, may be the most effective way forward. Practical support, such as mentoring, coaching, and peer networks, emerged as indispensable complements to formal training, especially when delivered flexibly through microlearning formats or community-based initiatives.

The burden of invisible work was a universal finding across contexts, directly constraining women's time and energy for business development. This aligns with research on time poverty (Hyde et al., 2020) and underscores the need for policies that both recognise and redistribute unpaid care responsibilities. Stakeholders proposed concrete measures, including care vouchers, local childcare solutions, and incentives for women-led care enterprises, which could simultaneously reduce constraints and create new business opportunities.

Access to finance remains an entrenched obstacle, shaped by both external and internal factors. Structural barriers such as gender bias in lending, sectoral misalignment with investor priorities, and complex administrative requirements persist. At the same time, many women entrepreneurs favour sustainable, small-scale growth over aggressive expansion, influencing their engagement with external funding. These findings support calls in the literature for diversified financial

ecosystems, incorporating microloans, gender-sensitive investment readiness training, and simplified grant schemes that match the varied trajectories of women-led enterprises.

Regarding digital transformation, women's uptake of technology remains concentrated in marketing functions, with less integration into core operations. This reflects documented digital skills gaps (UN Women, 2022) and is particularly acute in rural settings where infrastructure and training access are limited. Stakeholders emphasised the value of practical, sector-specific digital training, mentorship from digital experts, and supportive policy frameworks that facilitate adoption in resource-constrained environments.

Rural entrepreneurship presents a distinct set of challenges: limited local markets, social isolation, and entrenched gender norms often mean entrepreneurship is necessity-driven rather than opportunity-driven. These findings resonate with place-based policy literature (Muñoz & Kimmitt, 2019), suggesting that rural interventions should prioritise peer-led networks, trust-based partnerships with local authorities, and context-specific training over top-down, standardised programmes.

Finally, sectoral segregation and gender stereotypes continue to limit women's participation in high-value and male-dominated sectors such as STEM, agriculture, and fisheries. Weak enforcement of equality policies and the scarcity of visible female leaders perpetuate these patterns. Stakeholders called for coordinated campaigns, stronger monitoring of parity measures, and proactive recruitment strategies to shift representation and perception.

Across all themes, the consultations revealed a policy–practice gap: supportive measures often fail to reach intended beneficiaries due to rigid eligibility rules, insufficient dissemination, or overly complex application procedures. This gap reinforces the importance of participatory policy design, where women entrepreneurs are directly involved in shaping the instruments meant to support them.

Taken together, the evidence calls for a multi-layered policy response that integrates gender sensitivity into all levels of entrepreneurship policy, while addressing the specific needs of underrepresented groups such as rural women, those re-entering the workforce, and micro-enterprise owners in low-profit sectors. In doing so, policymakers can move beyond fragmented interventions toward coherent, inclusive, and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems that both recognise and amplify women's contributions across the economy.

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This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA20112 PROFEEDBACK, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research, career and innovation. Visit www.cost.eu