



# ifempower

## **WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN EUROPE**

CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES AND  
POLICIES





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# **Executive Summary**

## 1. Executive Summary

The present research report summarises the results of the comparative sociological study carried out in the seven participating countries of iFEMPOWER project: Hungary, Romania, Austria, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Iceland. As such, it serves as a description of the state of the art in female entrepreneurship in Europe. As a qualitative research conducted at the beginning of our project its aim was to explore and understand the realities and meanings of female entrepreneurship in today's Europe. It focused on the motivations, challenges faced and coping strategies developed by women entrepreneurs, as well as on the interpretations they offered concerning their roles and social status. Lastly, as an exploratory study aiming to provide empirical input for the international module and the teaching material to be developed within the iFEMPOWER project, it also grasps on good practices developed by other female entrepreneurship programmes and general ideas regarding adequate policies of supporting women's entrepreneurial activity.

The research was carried out between October 2018 and February 2019 and it comprised semi-structured interviews with stakeholders: in total 57 interviews were carried out with women entrepreneurs and 26 with experts of the topic. In addition, four focus group interviews were held and several video testimonials were recorded. The research activity was based on a common and standardised methodology (interview and focus guides) in order to make comparisons possible. Although the results cannot be statistically generalised, the convenience sample was carefully designed in such a way that included a variety of stakeholders: women entrepreneurs belonging to different groups (male and female dominated sectors, creative industries, lower and higher income regions, smaller and larger companies, family firms, newer and established firms) and experts of several fields and representing varied domains (decision making, higher education, consulting and business support, women's entrepreneurial organisations).

The most important results can be summarized as follows:

- At the beginning a *secondary analysis of national and international statistical data* was conducted from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM-Women). While in most countries among 10 working people around 8-9 are employees, Southern and Eastern European countries (ES, PT and RO) are characterised by a higher share of self-employment and entrepreneurship. Austria also belongs to the group of higher entrepreneurial rates. Generally, men are 2-3 times more likely to start a business than women, but this gender gap in entrepreneurship is especially important in Iceland and Romania.
- Then the interviews carried out with women entrepreneurs was analysed aiming at exploring their *experiences and practices*:



## Women Entrepreneurs in Europe.

- o first, a description of the sample is provided. The sample became rather homogeneous in terms of *educational background and social status*: most women have graduated from higher education and those whose training was not practical enough in terms of entrepreneurial skills, managed to enrol to business courses later;
- o when selecting our interviewees, we paid special attention to include business women from both male and women dominated *economic sectors*; nevertheless, in most cases these firms operated on the *local or regional markets* with only few exceptions of larger companies targeting foreign markets as well;
- o the second focus of our attempt to understand women entrepreneurs' experience was exploring their *process* of becoming entrepreneurs with an emphasis on their motivations, decisions, resources, challenges, support received and strategies developed;
- o women's motivations for becoming entrepreneurs turned to be significantly diverse, however, as the literature also points out, they can be clustered in two groups: opportunity and necessity driven motivations. That means that the decision to start a firm might be driven from the wish to realize a business idea or after recognising the difficulties a woman encounters in the labour market, the wish to act independently;
- o it is highly typical for women to establish a firm only gradually: first, on a part-time basis being a student, an employee or on maternal leave in parallel. These strategies, among that of the "mompreneurs" presents specific cases providing women with sufficient safety;
- o the most valued resources used during establishing a firm are the support received from peers, family members and mentors, therefore, those who lack such role models and assistance, are highly aware of its value. Our sample also included women who successfully managed to attract capital to their venture;
- o challenges they meet were analysed on different levels: on the personal level, in managing the firm, in accessing capital and in facing social attitudes and discrimination. On the personal level reaching a work-life balance proved to be one of the greatest difficulties women entrepreneurs encountered;
- o a wide range of strategies were explored aiming to create work-life balance: these ranged from not having a private life at all or postponing family formation, through the temporary involvement of family assistance to managing to renegotiate the division of labour in the household with their spouses. One of the most widely used strategy, however, was to define entrepreneurship as a form of flexible and part-time job that is more easily adaptable to motherhood while children are young.

- The next section identified the multiple and complex images female entrepreneurs have of themselves as a group. The relevance of this section derived from the fact that self-representation had a direct impact on the way they formulated their goals and aspirations, and also on the way how adequate policy means were conceptualised to improve business women's social situation. An important group of women entrepreneurs argued for a "gender blind" approach, claiming that there was no significant difference in terms of opportunities, social conditions and challenges between male and female entrepreneurs. Other interviewees recognised that women entrepreneurs formed a different group and that their specific needs should have been taken into account in designing social policies. Nevertheless, their views on the roots of these differences were diverse: the first group emphasised the different character and personality of women; the second stressed the role of the only slowly changing traditional division of labour; the third claimed that business women had different styles of managing a firm, while the fourth set of explanations drew on the role of contextual factors in shaping women entrepreneurs' situation.
  - o the so-called "*gender-blind*" *conception* stresses the individual responsibility in shaping one's achievements and learning from one's failures. It argues that social and economic conditions create a levelled field for all actors who should be sufficiently motivated to continuously improve their skills and flexibility;
  - o those who admit a certain degree of differences or inequalities between men and women entrepreneurs are very likely to explain this with the *differences in character on the personal level*, whether biologically or socially acquired; in most cases these approaches operate with the stereotypical set of traits: irrationality, sensitivity, empathy, the wish to change society into better in the case of women;
  - o strongly connected to the previous point, many interviewees emphasised women's different conceptions and styles in firm management. This can be seen as the dynamic manifestation of the more static, unchangeable personality and it entails the set of practices and behaviours one applies in the business world;
  - o the third set of motivation is more social than the previous ones and it refers to the "double burden" women are endowed with: although more and more men are getting involved in child raising the traditional division of labour is only slowly changing. However, in the meantime women are expected to fulfil their roles as paid workers and household care workers at the same time;
  - o the fourth cluster of explanations acknowledges the role of society at the most, emphasising the role of social expectations, that of the double educational standards applied in the families and in schools as well as the

wide range of hostile attitudes, chilly climate and discrimination women entrepreneurs face.

- Given the rationale of our research activity, a core aim of our study was to explore existing *good practices of female entrepreneurship support programmes* across the studied European countries. Since not all case studies provided such examples, we had concerns regarding the generalization of these results. We relied on both groups of our interviewees, namely entrepreneurs and experts. The most appreciated programmes that had impact on women entrepreneurs can be clustered in the following way:
  - o programmes and trainings organised at universities: both types were well received and highly valued. Generally speaking, all programmes aiming to turn universities into entrepreneurship friendly spaces were welcome;
  - o courses and trainings targeting women through which participants were able to learn new knowledge, new skills and have their mind-set adapted to the business world;
  - o grant schemes provided by local or central administration specially dedicated to women or early career/young entrepreneurs;
  - o start-up accelerators with additional services, such as boosting presentation skills, budgeting and other valuable skills in the entrepreneurial life;
  - o organisations of women business angels encouraging women investors to prioritise women start-uppers in their financing decisions.
- Both the women entrepreneurs and the experts were asked during the interviews to share their ideas and opinions on the most efficient forms of trainings that they personally would find useful in their careers. At a more general level interviewees argued that there were four main approaches through which gender inequalities in entrepreneurship could be tackled: 1) changing social norms, 2) formal and informal education, 3) implementing structural changes and state policies and 4) NGO services.
- **Relevant training programmes aiming to improve (potential) women entrepreneurs' opportunities and situation should follow one of these very important goals: to provide greater visibility to women entrepreneurs, transform university environment into a more entrepreneurship-friendly one, or to provide mentoring, internship and networking opportunities.**
- As one interviewee put it, when designing a training programme, one should always decide whether it aimed at teaching FOR or ABOUT entrepreneurship. This has far reaching consequences for the way it is conceptualised, whether it stresses hard knowledge or personal skill development.

- **Regarding the necessary and adequate content there was a consensus among interviewees, views concerning the target groups can be grouped into three clusters:** some entrepreneurs and experts claimed that the trainings should be **gender neutral**, thus targeting mixed groups in terms of gender. They argued that since business life is dominated by men, it is pointless to train women for women-only situations; others considered that given previous experiences of exclusion or discrimination women only feel comfortable enough “daring” to ask sensitive questions, too, if they are **among women**. Lastly, a third idea was exposed by an experienced trainer arguing that the **most efficient training programmes should be two-staged: first only targeting women, and then working with mixed groups.**



# Introduction

## **2. Introduction**

The present research report aims at summarising the empirical data collected throughout the first major activity of the iFEMPOWER project. Its objective is to provide a general and comparative overview of the situation of female entrepreneurs in the partner countries of the project, as well as to reveal relevant stakeholders' experiences and thoughts on policies supporting female entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the most important objective of this report is to provide an empirical input for our colleagues in iFEMPOWER who are responsible for developing the international module and training material for university students.

The project was initiated as a response to the enduring, although very slowly narrowing gender gap in entrepreneurship. This gap is one indicator of the many that point to the persistent gender inequality in the labour market. While women are increasingly educated (in fact their level of education generally exceeds that of men), a wide range of labour market indicators shows that equality of opportunities is far from being reached. Among these the most notable are the gender pay gap, sectorial segregation, women's low representation in managerial and executive jobs, as well as women's high share in part-time jobs and other forms of atypical employment that usually render lower and more precarious employment status.

iFEMPOWER project assumes an active role in addressing one of the aspects of women's disadvantaged positions, focusing more on entrepreneurship and less on self-employment. Self-employment is much more widespread than entrepreneurship and it is definitely less male dominated. At the same time, statistics show that the self-employed are less educated, earn less and also have more insecure position in the labour market. Therefore, our objective is to tackle women's underrepresentation in the group of entrepreneurs. Although entrepreneurs do not form a homogeneous group, women's limited access to this status reflects a series of disadvantages in terms of social mobility and income, responsibility and freedom, meaningful work and flexible working schedules. Entrepreneurship is one of the driving forces of innovation in society, therefore women's lower opportunity to engage in entrepreneurial action disadvantages not only women themselves, but also society at large, by "wasting" a significant amount of human capital.

Women's position in society and in the labour market has been an increasingly studied topic in economics, but more in sociology. In parallel, society's interest has been directed towards these issues, as well. In the past years a series of international and local projects were initiated that encourage or assist in some way women to improve their social and economic positions; female business angel networks have turned their interest towards female start-up owners, while pitching and networking events for future women entrepreneurs are being organised on a regular basis in most bigger cities. Conferences and workshops create platforms for discussion

and analysis, and more and more decision makers are searching for adequate policy instruments to tackle women's unequal access to the entrepreneurial life.

iFEMPOWER project aims to enrich and complement these series of projects and approaches, while also meaning to offer a novel approach through its choice for the target group. Its trainings and courses are going to be offered to university students, especially women. This conception attempts to address two issues. On the one hand it tackles female disadvantages, while on the other the issue of inadequate university curricula in terms of professional training for entrepreneurial career.

The project aims to prioritise the members of one of the most disadvantaged groups in terms of entrepreneurship, i.e. women, while on the other it seeks to identify ways in which university courses can be improved. Both aspects and levels of intervention are important. According to previous studies perceived competence can have a positive impact on people's willingness to start an entrepreneurial career (Ajzen 1991, Krueger & Brazeal 1994). Regarding university teaching and curricula, GUESSS-studies have shown the crucial role of economic and entrepreneurial content, as well as the importance of a supportive university climate in directing young people's interest towards entrepreneurship (Sieger – Fueglistaller – Zellweger, 2016).

The present research has been carried out in order to collect empirical data which can reveal the *status-quo* of women's situation in the business world, and also to provide relevant insights with regard to already existing female entrepreneurship policies. For this we conducted a qualitative study in each participant country, i.e. Austria, Romania, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Spain and Portugal, with the support of the project members. The research consisted of semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs and experts of female entrepreneurship and where possible, focus group interviews were carried also out with young business women possessing a shorter (up to 3-4 years') experience in the entrepreneurial world.

The following report summarises the most important data and results of the study. Besides this introduction it comprises six chapters. The first reiterates the research questions and the main points of the methodology, as they were described in the Methodological guidelines, while the second provides background statistical data regarding female entrepreneurship in the selected countries. and a description of the sample. The third chapter deals with the experiences of being a woman entrepreneur in today's Europe, discussing at length motivations, challenges and strategies adopted in the different phases of the entrepreneurial career. The remaining three chapters focus on views and opinions, rather than facts and they strive to understand first how women entrepreneurs themselves see their opportunities and the social conditions that shape their activities. Then the subsequent chapter discusses previous support programmes encountered by women entrepreneurs and experts across the studied countries. Lastly the chapter dedicated to recommendations is meant to assist those who work towards developing training and support programmes targeting future and already active women entrepreneurs.



# **Women entrepreneurs in Europe**

## **Challenges, strategies and policies**



### 3. Research question and methodology

As the first activity of the project this *baseline study* has been designed in such a way that it provides both the background and the point of departure for the educational programme. The present chapter contains two sections: the first one presents in details the objectives and the research questions of the study, while the second describes the methods that were being used during the data collection.

#### 3.1. The research questions

The **research** has three objectives:

- 1) its most important aim is to provide an *understanding of the situation of women entrepreneurs* in all participating societies to map the difficulties the project is expected to address;
- 2) in addition, it has a *needs assessment role* through studying the specific needs and challenges early career women entrepreneurs meet and have met during their first years;
- 3) last, but not least its 'latent' objective is to build a network of successful women entrepreneurs, experts and other stakeholders who are willing to take up mentoring roles throughout the project.

According to the Methodological guideline set up at beginning of the research the activities consisted of a complex empirical study using three methods:

- 1) Semi-structured interviews with established women entrepreneurs and experts of entrepreneurship.
- 2) Desk research aiming to gather statistical data and information regarding the main social, economic and political stakeholders involved in shaping women entrepreneurs' situation.
- 3) Focus group interviews to be conducted with early career business women.

According to the **Methodological guideline** prepared for the members of the international team the research questions that we aim to address are the following:

- a) What kind of role do women play in small, medium and larger enterprises?
- b) What are their main motivations for starting a business or joining the family firm?
- c) What are their experiences as firm owners and/or managers regarding access to capital, labour force, social capital and access to the market?
- d) What strategies do they adopt to combine work with care responsibilities?

- e) What is their perception on the (in)equalities of opportunities in society?
- f) How does the legal framework, as well as the economic, social and political structures affect their activity?
- g) How does or could university education improve women's possibilities to start their own firms?
- h) What are stakeholders' expectations regarding adequate and effective policy responses and incentives targeting future women entrepreneurs?

### 3.2. Sampling and methodology

As in the case of most qualitative studies, our interviewees were expected to be selected in line with the rules of the so-called *convenience sampling technique*. Both interviewee groups – that of women entrepreneurs and of experts – were expected to be diverse and to reflect as much as possible the different categories of women and experts working in the field. From the seven countries participating in the project, i.e. Hungary, Germany, Austria, Romania, Iceland, Spain and Portugal, each participant was requested to conduct 10–15 interviews. It was very important to include in the **sample female entrepreneurs** working in male dominated sectors or who are managing larger companies. On the other hand, the fieldwork was expected to focus on regions outside the larger and prosperous capital cities. Further categories that needed to be included: owners of start-ups, owners of companies that operate in the creative industry. Given their share in the private economy we advised our partners to approach family businesses which have at least one woman among their co-owners and managers. As a means to provide empirical visibility for groups of entrepreneurs less popularised we defined a special quota for entrepreneurs from lower income regions and for women entrepreneurs living with a disability.

The rationale behind deciding to conduct **expert interviews** was the attempt to understand the limits and opportunities determining women entrepreneurs' career "from a distance", from the point of view of experts. Thus, interviewers were asked to approach university teachers who can provide an insight on existing subjects, curricula and teaching methodologies that are relevant for entrepreneurial socialisation. Decision makers from all levels were supposed to be selected if their work is somehow related to the situation of women entrepreneurs (e.g. through the implementation of instruments that provide a better work-life balance or through policies that aim at encouraging women to start businesses). A third sub-group of experts were supposed to include members of the civil society providing any kind of support to future or already active female entrepreneurs. Fourth, members or leaders of associations dealing with women entrepreneurs were also being considered important.

In order to ensure comparability, interview guides were prepared by the research coordinator of HETFA. **The guide for women entrepreneurs** contained the following sections of questions:

- General introduction
- The story of becoming an entrepreneur

- Challenges in running the business
- Personal level challenges
- Experience with women entrepreneurship programs and policies
- Opinions regarding such policies

The **expert interview guide** based less on personal stories and narratives, instead it focused on previous knowledge, expertise and expert opinion on policy making.

Lastly, the **focus group interviews**, although not were compulsory were included in the research project with the aim of conducting special and interactive research with young women entrepreneurs whose experience is not longer than 3-4 years. These discussions were primarily focused on problems, challenges and ideas regarding necessary policy solutions.

## 4. The contexts and national samples

The present chapter aims to sketch the international, but more importantly the national contexts within which social actors work and build their careers. This is important to be able to place our empirical results within the larger “picture”. For this purpose, three sources are used:

- 1) The official statistical data provided by the International Labour Organisation (ILO);
- 2) Comprehensive and comparative survey data provided by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), especially its 2017 edition focused on female entrepreneurs, and
- 3) Subjective descriptions and interpretations given by interviewees throughout the fieldwork.

This chapter consists of two sections. The first one provides an overview of the structure of the labour market from the point of view of the two genders, based on data from the ILO. The second focuses exclusively on male and female entrepreneurs, exploring the differences between the two groups in terms of intentions and longevity of the enterprise.

### 4.1. The share of employers and self-employed in national labour markets

According to the ILO “[e]mployers are those workers who, working on their own account or with one or a few partners, hold the type of jobs defined as a “self-employment jobs” (i.e. jobs where the remuneration is directly dependent upon the profits derived from the goods and services produced), and, in this capacity, have engaged, on a continuous basis, one or more persons to work for them as employee(s). Own-account workers are those workers who, working on their own account or with one or more partners, hold the type of jobs defined as a “self-employment jobs”, and have not engaged on a continuous basis any employees to work for them”. (ILO)<sup>1</sup>

As we can see in the table below the vast majority of the working population works as an employee. Among the countries we study the highest shares (88-90%) can be found in

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<sup>1</sup> See ILO Glossary of Statistical Terms: <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=772> (15.02.2019)

Hungary, Germany, Austria and Iceland. The ratio of entrepreneurs revolves around 5% in most countries, except for Romania where it barely exceeds 1%. In most labour markets the group of own-account workers is larger than that of those who hire employees. Nevertheless, in this regard we can identify two clusters: the first one is made up of those countries where the share of the self-employed and those of business owners (with employees) is roughly identical. To this group belongs Austria, Germany and Hungary. In the rest of the countries the ratio of own-account workers is 2 or 3 times higher than that of entrepreneurs.

The countries included in the sample differ with regard to the extent to which entrepreneurship and self-employment is male-dominated. Entrepreneurship is the most male dominated in Germany, Hungary and Iceland, while among the self-employed the gender gap is the largest in Iceland, Portugal, Romania and Spain. In all countries women are underrepresented among those who work on their own.

	Employees	Employers	Own-account workers	Contributing family workers	Not classifiable	Total employment
<b>Austria total</b>	<b>87.6</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Men	85.4	6.4	6.9	1.3	0	100.0
Women	90.2	2.7	5.5	1.7	0	100.0
<b>Germany total</b>	<b>89.8</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Men	87.5	6.1	6.2	0.2	0	100.0
Women	92.5	2.4	4.6	0.5	0	100.0
<b>Hungary total</b>	<b>89.7</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Men	87.9	6.1	5.8	0.1	0	100.0
Women	91.7	2.9	4.9	0.5	0	100.0
<b>Iceland total</b>	<b>88.2</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Men	84.6	5.6	9.7	0.1		100.0
Women	92.4	1.9	5.5	0.2		100.0
<b>Portugal total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Men	78.9	6.5	14.2	0.4	0	100.0

Women	87.3	3	9.2	0.5	0	100.0
<b>Romania total</b>	<b>73.7</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>17.1</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Men	72.3	1.4	21.6	4.7		100.0
Women	75.5	0.6	11.2	12.7	0	100.0
<b>Spain total</b>	<b>83.5</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>10.9</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Men	79.9	6.6	13.2	0.4	0	100.0
Women	87.8	3.4	8.3	0.6	0.1	100.0

**Table 3 – Employment by status in selected European countries, 2017. Source: ILO, 2017**

## 4.2. Women entrepreneurs in different phases of their careers

The data collected in the framework of Global Entrepreneurship Monitor make it possible to compare the different country indicators with those calculated for their larger regions, in our case Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The share of women's total entrepreneurial activity, based on GEM data is the following.

	Female TEA	Ratio F/M TEA	Female TEA Necessity (% of TEA Females)	Entrepreneurial intentions Female	Female Established Business Activity
Austria	8.1	0.7	18.8	10.9	5.9
Germany	3.1	0.5	21.9	5.5	4.4
Hungary	5.0	0.5	21.5	14.6	4.1
Portugal	6.1	0.6	9.9	12.4	4.2
Romania	7.5	0.5	26.4	25.1	5.7
Spain	4.7	0.8	25.1	5.7	5.1
Europe and Central Asia (Regional Average)	6.3	0.6	25.0	12.4	4.7

**Table 4 – Data on female entrepreneurship in selected European countries, 2016/2017, author's compilation. Source: GEM 2016/2017**

The table reveals that from the countries included in the study Austria and Romania have the highest Female TEA rates. TEA (Total Early Stage Entrepreneurial Activity) include all those

entrepreneurs who are either preparing to start a business or have already started it for no longer than 42 months. The countries with the highest levels of female entrepreneurial intentions are Romania and Portugal, while in Spain and Germany only 5% of women have such plans.

The last table from this section displays data regarding changes in indicators of female entrepreneurship. From the countries we study only in Austria the share of women entrepreneurs who started their companies out of necessity has increased. In Hungary and Portugal their share has decreased by more than 50%. The share of established women entrepreneurs has increased in two and decreased in the rest of the countries, while in the region it has stagnated.

The table below shows the changes in the period 2014-2016 based on GEM data.

	% Change Female TEA 2014– 2016	% Change Female Necessity 2014– 2016	2016 Ratio F/M intentions	% Change of Female Intentions 2014– 2016	2016 Female Established Business Ownership	% Change of Female Established Business Ownership 2014–2016
Austria	14%	80%	0.7	28%	5.9	-14%
Germany	-22%	-19%	0.6	-23%	4.4	41%
Hungary	-5%	-50%	0.7	6%	4.1	-19%
Portugal	-27%	-53%	0.6	-1%	4.2	-22%
Romania	14%	-12%	0.7	-7%	5.7	11%
Spain	2%	-28%	0.9	-29%	5.1	-16%
<b>Europe and Central Asia (Regional Average)</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>-12%</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0%</b>

**Table 5 – Data on female entrepreneurship in selected European countries, 2016/2017, author's compilation. Source: GEM 2016/2017**

We can conclude that in all countries employees make up around 85-90% of the working people. Generally speaking, in our selection of cases, countries from Southern and Eastern Europe (ES, PT and RO) are characterised by a higher share of self-employment and entrepreneurship. In Austria the entrepreneurial rate is among the highest, too. Nevertheless, in Iceland and Romania the gender gap in entrepreneurship is greater than in the rest of the societies where men are around two times more likely to be entrepreneurs than women. The rate of established women entrepreneurs is the highest in Austria and Romania, whereas Romanian and Portuguese women show the strongest entrepreneurial intentions.

## 5. Women entrepreneurs

The present chapter aims at understanding the *experience* of being a woman entrepreneur in the societies in which the research has been carried out. It is based on the analysis of the 57 semi-structured and four focus-group interviews conducted in Hungary, Romania, Portugal, Spain, Germany, Austria and Iceland and it describes first the profile of the interviewees, then – somewhat in a temporal order – the experience of becoming an entrepreneur, the challenges they face and lastly, the support they receive and the strategies they develop to cope with the difficulties. It is important to note that since we applied convenience sampling techniques none of the descriptions is statistically significant neither for the individual countries, nor for the “*European women entrepreneurs*” in general. For that purpose, a survey based on large representative samples should have been conducted. Our results presented in chapter 5 aim at offering an understanding of the situation of women entrepreneurs as it is seen by themselves.

### 5.1. Educational background, economic sectors and markets

According to the GEM Women Report (GEM, 2017) in European countries approximately only one third of women entrepreneurs have got a post-secondary degree. Yet, our sample in the IFEMPOWER project is to a great extent biased towards highly skilled women entrepreneurs. Except from 2 cases all our interviewees have graduated from tertiary education. Given that most researchers from our team used their personal and professional networks to carry out the interviews, the professional background of the women included in the sample is rather homogeneous. According to the professional profiles of our interviewees there are 5 clusters of university graduates:

- *creative fields*: arts, design, graphic design, photography, architecture and landscape architecture;
- *social, economic sciences and humanities*: sociology, anthropology, foreign languages, philosophy;
- *psychological studies*: psychology and psychotherapy, human resource management;
- *communication*, media;
- *natural sciences and programming*, tourism, IT, mathematics.

*Only in some cases does the university or post-graduate degree “match” the profile of the company they started.* Yet, one interviewee, opposing to the family tradition of everyone being a woodworking engineer, applied for economics studies. Not being admitted she completed IT courses (furniture manufacturing, family business, HU).

In the sample we can also find women who *attended higher education programs with economic profile*. Most of them emphasise that their choice was conscious, as they already planned to launch a business. These subjects include: marketing, sales, business and economics, foreign trade and finance.

Especially those women who graduated from a non-economic faculty emphasised that the curricula were rather theoretical. Economic studies were the most practical in our sample. Therefore, after deciding to start a business a significant segment of our sample *enrolled to post-graduate trainings or courses with the aim of becoming more prepared for the business life*. One interviewee, in order to start the firm took a range of courses among which the most valuable proved to be the barista course (food service, HU). A consultant expert, after leaving her job as a teacher completed a training that taught her the methodology she was still using in her business (consulting, IS).

A woman from Iceland obtained a Business Administration (BS) degree in Music Business from a US university: the curriculum largely consisted of hands-on project work, which was proven to be valuable for her today. Some post-graduate programs included visits to companies and industry representatives helping students to get to know the business environment better. Specific courses had proven valuable, such as “Music business law and contract negotiation” and “Entrepreneurship leadership and management”. The training in finance had also proven a valuable addition to the skillset she had before joining the program. (entertainment, IS).

A special case in our sample was that of the German system of dual education which split the programme into a theoretical and a practical part. The first is being completed in school (or at the university), while the practical training is offered by companies. In the case of a woman who studied finance in the form of dual education the practice was realized in banks. She found the practical training useful in a reversed manner: by getting to know the internal life of banks better she could decide from the very beginning not to start a career as a bank employee but to start a business of her own (financial services, DE).

The firms operate in a variety of economic sectors: among the male-dominated sectors we find: light industry, food industry, IT and technology, manufacturing, entertainment. On the other hand, companies from the service sector, especially those of offering personal services (psychotherapy, coach), education (music), services (consulting), education and skills training, coaching are part of the more female dominated sectors.

A common characteristic of the firms included in our sample is that they target mostly the local markets. This is on the one hand a general trend in economy, i.e. the smaller size and the local focus of female-owned companies. On the other hand, there is a clear sampling bias in our research towards smaller service companies targeting mainly local clients. Nevertheless, one of interviewees' most important goals was to penetrate into the international markets.

## 5.2. The process of becoming an entrepreneur

Our study aims at identifying the most common and most typical challenges women entrepreneurs meet when setting up and managing their firms. For this we consider it crucial to learn about the beginnings: their motivations, the stories of how they started their entrepreneurial careers, the difficulties and the support they received. This is important because literature often finds that women are driven by specific motivations which lead to specific



careers and challenges. In the following we describe the crucial aspects, stages and types of female entrepreneurship.

### 5.2.1. Motivations

One of the favourite topics most women entrepreneurs enjoy talking about is their motivation to start the business. These motivations can be grouped into “push” and “pull” factors, or to put it differently, “opportunity” and “necessity” driven clusters. The reasons they enumerated we clustered in the following way:

**Courage & opportunity:** a common topic emerging from the interviews is the need to be bold enough to start a business. This can be best exemplified by an Austrian woman who returned from America where she got to know the American way of life, to “just do things” and the wish to work without a boss. This feeling pushed her towards entrepreneurship (the owners of a communication and advertising company, rural areas, Austria).

**No career perspectives and less satisfaction:** many interviewees were “pushed” towards entrepreneurship by the experience that the status of employee did not offer sufficient career perspectives. Also, being an employee offered no satisfaction either:

*“I was working as an employee for nearly 20 years, getting from one job to another, and getting more and more independent things done. But after a while I noticed that I was an Eastern European representative of a group of companies - I was not an entrepreneur yet, but I had to create the necessary infrastructure and conditions for my work. I was almost 50 years old when I felt that I wanted to do something that was about me, what I control.”* (food industry, HU)

Another interviewee claimed that she would not have been satisfied by a job that could be offered by a bank expecting her to focus only on certain aspects (some specific products, phases). She preferred to tailor made her services flexibly for the needs of the customers (financial services, DE). Employment led many people to burnout, thus they started to search for something more rewarding and more enjoyable (consulting, IS).

**Lack of jobs:** in some cases, the company where the women used to work closed down. A German landscape architect, for example, decided to take over some former customers and started an own firm.

**Seizing the need & mission & societal duty:** certain female entrepreneurs’ aim is to offer a solution to a problem they experienced personally, to fill a gap (for example the lack of accessibility of many events for people living with a disability in the Austrian sample).

**To make an impact:** it was a very powerful motivation to make real change in society, instead of working for a bigger organisation (focus group, Austria).

**Flexibility & improving work-life balance:** this motivation can be considered as one of the most commonly claimed one:

*„Even with my first child, I was very stressed that I couldn't spend much time at home and I didn't see them [the family]. I couldn't really perform as well as I wanted in all of my roles . [...] I didn't spend a lot of time at home.” (coach, self-employed, Hungary)*

After being a teacher in the public school system an Icelandic woman was looking for something more flexible (consulting, IS).

***Being a “natural entrepreneur”:*** many women claimed they were not able to imagine themselves other than an entrepreneur; while other persons considered that they were “not being fit for employment” (coach, self-employed, Austria), valuing individual freedom and independence (Focus#2, Austria). An interviewee recalled being always more competitive than her siblings, beginning with her childhood (marketing, HU). This motivation is closely linked to the wish to turn a *previous activity/hobby* into a wage earning activity and the determination to *learn and develop new, individual skills and apply the theoretical knowledge in practice*.

***Lack of ability to reintegrate in the labour market after maternal leave*** is one of the most common reasons necessitating to start a business. A last push factor is the rigidity of *legislation* which in some cases makes it impossible for people to work as employees, as in the case of a woman from Iceland whose degree obtained abroad was not recognised in Iceland (care sector, IS).

In the following section we create and describe a typology of women entrepreneurs based on the strategies they applied to start their firms.

### 5.2.2. Starting the firm part-time

Many people, especially women start their business gradually, allowing for a period of time to be both an employee and a self-employed.

In some cases, entrepreneurship is being regarded as a *trial activity during full-time or part-time employment*. For example, a Hungarian business woman built up her part-time coaching business as a trial in the entrepreneurial world while still working as a manager in the private sector (coach, self-employed, Hungary). Another interviewee from the consulting business intended to maintain financial safety by still working as an employee. Most participants of Focus#2 in Austria have a stable job as an employee for financial and security reasons. In the case of an Icelandic firm both founders decided to start the company while being still employed: they designed products which they sold through distributors based on a franchising agreement (manufacturing, IS).

Individual economic activity may also be regarded as a *trial activity during higher education studies* by those who choose informal part-time self-employment while being student (coach, Austria).

Starting a company often means to change the domain one used to work in. *Switching the field of activity* was the case of a woman who first worked in the commerce, then engaged in full-time activity in production (food industry, Austria).

### 5.2.3. Previous work experience

Most of the women we interviewed started their careers as employees. The previous work experience may come from years or decades of working for a private company, for a public institution or even as informal self-employed. From our rich empirical data, we draw on the cases when women started an entrepreneurial career in the same field either driven by the wish to work independently and thus, more efficiently, or as an attempt to reach a better work-life balance. A second category includes those women whose former work experience is not related to their later entrepreneurial activity.

The founding of a business is preceded in many cases by working as employee, often in multinational environment and in management positions (e.g. in Portugal). But becoming a mother is only rarely compatible with management jobs in the private (multinational) sector which makes many women turn to self-employment or entrepreneurship (coach, self-employed, HU). In many cases becoming an entrepreneur happens gradually, with a period of overlap between the old job and the new activity (HU): this usually provides a large network on which women can rely when starting an own firm (HU). An Austrian entrepreneur spent more than one decade in employment as psychologist, then, due to the heavy work load she switched to private practice (psychologist & expert, Austria).

Many women became disappointed by the lack of perspectives in their employment when decided to take up the first business opportunity that comes to their mind: an owner of a food service company in Hungary used to be a Central and Eastern European representative of a multinational company, thus dealing with foreign trade. Another woman, managing currently a consulting company in Iceland used to work as a teacher in public education.

*"I think those were the hardest years in my life (with employee status). I did not like what I had to do. Paper work. It was not for me."*

*"I didn't like my previous job so I decided that I wouldn't do that anymore, and I must start something what I liked. I said to myself, if I spent here another 5-10 years, my life was passing by at a "secure" workplace that I didn't like" (Romania)*

As already touched upon, the company had been often set up gradually: for a decade the business was managed part-time, while still working as a part-time employee (food industry, Austria & IT self-employed, low income region, Austria). This is in accordance with the findings of other studies (e.g. GUESS research).

The case of family businesses is special from this point of view. Several interviewees had had different jobs (e.g. an administrative job at a university), while also helping out in the family firm (family business in the light industry, Hungary). We often encountered women who had had no initial intention to join the family business which made them choose a job in a different sector (light industry, family business, HU & furniture manufacturing, family firm, HU). Another woman decided to gain experience first in a different company but in the same sector before joining the family firm (textile industry, DE).

The relative widespread preference for a more gradual process of becoming an entrepreneur – that is, working first as an employee and only after some time starting the own business – is motivated by a series of factors: it allows for the accumulation of professional experience, network or financial resources. The years spent in employment can prove useful either they carried out similar or other activities. An Icelandic woman for instance took up an au-pair job first, and then switched to the music industry in the United States. At last she became an entrepreneur in the entertainment business in Iceland. Another owner of a tech start-up in Iceland spent a few years travelling after graduation, then had worked as an employee in two tech start-ups after which she started her own company with similar profile together with two other co-owners (tech start-up, IS).

Generally, working abroad was only rarely mentioned by our interviewees, however, when it occurred it was typically referred to as a useful experience in terms of getting to know different cultures. An Austrian owner of a communication and advertising company from rural areas considers her 2 years' stay in Chicago as a time when:

*“... the experience of being away from their usual surroundings proved to be a motivating factor of <not wanting to do the same as before>”.*

Another Austrian business woman worked abroad in the field she had studied – anthropology – just to return home and become a self-employed in IT.

#### **5.2.4. Starting one's career as an entrepreneur**

GUESSS-studies have shown that not even students in economics plan to become entrepreneurs right after graduation. The share of those who see themselves as entrepreneurs 5–10 later is much higher than those who intend to start a business immediately after finishing university studies. This tendency is well reflected in our qualitative study as well. In fact, it would be safe to claim that only those women entrepreneurs have “skipped” the employment phase who also called or considered themselves as “natural entrepreneurs”.

In our sample this strategy proved to be the most widespread among highly skilled professionals (who in fact often did not even define themselves as entrepreneurs): doctors, translators (e.g. in the Portuguese sample) and artists. We encountered two business women from Austria who were both the owners and managers of art related firms. They both started their careers as self-employed or entrepreneurs: one in fact had already started working on her own during university years as a painter to become an art manager later. The second, today the owner of a music school (a family business) had started her career as a private music teacher and after some years she founded the school to “have an institution as a safe and protecting environment for herself”. She had a “*silent partner*”, and elderly Austrian man, who invested money in her business and helped her with advice and his prior experience. Thirdly, a coach working in Austria followed the same path.

As it can be seen in the examples above, this choice implies in fact two strategies: one can either start as entrepreneur or choose a more gradual path first as self-employed and only afterwards switching to entrepreneurship.

### 5.2.5. The “momprenneurship” trajectory

Based on our interviews the “momprenneurship” strategy can be highlighted as an attempt to emphasise the challenges women with children face when trying to balance work and life. As a concept still in formation there is no single definition for “momprenneurship” in literature, however, most experts agree that mothers with young children who switch from their employed status to self-employment or entrepreneurship trying to better accommodate work with caring duties are the mompreneurs. Additionally, in many cases these women entrepreneurs offer goods or services that are related to children or motherhood. The quote below reflects the decision making process and motivations of becoming a “momprenneur”:

*“I have a totally different type of university degree from what I do now. (...) I started to work as social worker and after 2-3 years my first child was born. And then the other two in line (...) At my workplace I used to organise handicrafts events for children. So I continued this... During my maternity leave [6 years], this was my relax and recharge. When the third child was born, I started to make the leader jewellery. It seemed a bit more serious and something that could be sold. (...) So I was doing this. And there was a quite big demand, so I worked a lot.” (Romania, 33 years, creative industry)*

### 5.2.6. The case of family businesses

Family businesses, while defined in multiple ways in literature, are generally considered to include those firms that are owned at least 51% by the members of the same family and where at least two members of the family work. According to international estimations approximately 60% of European companies may be considered family businesses. In our research we studied the motivations and strategies of either founding or joining a family firm separately.

In our study we encountered cases when the interviewee was *the founder herself*, in other cases she was the *daughter of the parents who had owned the firm* for a long time. In the latter instance, to put it very simply, theoretically two kinds of cases were found. First, it is taken for granted by all actors involved that the daughter would continue the family tradition and become the future manager. In other cases, there was no such evident will or plan.

When all parties, parents and children alike, prepared for the eventual transfer of the firm to the next generation every professional or personal decision became part of this strategy: children’s education and gradual socialisation within the firm as a teenager and then as a young person was seen as a form of preparation for his/her future involvement. Nevertheless, even during the “apprenticeship” at the company, the takeover could sometimes be speeded up by a family loss or crisis (e.g. the death of a founder, Hungarian interviewee from the light industry).

In other cases, it is usually not the parents, but the children who are either hesitant or reluctant to join the firm. The most often mentioned difficulties were the high level of expectations felt by the children or the transforming interpersonal relations:

*„We've been prepared [to join the family enterprise] from our childhood by our parents. The difficulty was that it was a family enterprise, so much more was expected [from me] here, than at another company.” (HU, woman in her thirties, rural area, large enterprise)*  
*„Obviously this is a special situation from this point of view, we have a lot of colleagues who had been working here for more than twenty years, they had practically known me since my childhood, and then such a special situation [occurred] that I became the leader from that little child. And it was [a difficulty], but I think that they accepted me relatively quickly, so it is not anymore [a difficulty].” (light industry, family business, HU)*

As a German interviewee said, previously it was not planned or decided that she would take over the company. For several years she was employed by another company and gained relevant experiences in field of trading. Her first responsibility in the family company were to replace her mother in the marketing department. Thus, gradually she developed skills and competencies in managing an enterprise – with external support from coaches whom she hired on a case by case basis (textile industry, DE). An interview conducted at a furniture manufacturing firm from Hungary revealed that the lack of interest or perceived distance between “femininity” and industry might be also obstacles of getting involved in the family firm.

The investigation also revealed several cases where the interviewees were founders of the family businesses themselves. The already mentioned owner of the music school owned the enterprise together with her partner and her sister, but she alone was the founder of the school, her boyfriend and sister joined only later (Austria). The Austrian sample includes a similar case in the consulting business and also a company that was purchased 30 years before by the interviewee together with her husband, investing a huge amount of personal money and assets (pharmaceutical company, Austria).

As literature emphasises, family firms may be the sites of multiple interpersonal tensions whether caused by the lack of willingness to continue the family tradition or intergenerational inadequacies. One interviewee described the consequences of her involvement in the family firm in which she brought a new management style, new production and marketing decisions (textile industry, DE):

*"My father and my brothers had always been dedicated to the naval sector, a job that was never for women, but I struggled to make a position for myself. The desire to work, to struggle to continue with the family tradition, made me choose and find motivation" (SME in construction, ES)*

### 5.2.7. Role models in the founding phase of an enterprise

Previous research has shown that especially in the case of women role models can have relevance in directing their attention towards entrepreneurship. It is also widely acknowledged in literature that having a family member or a close friend involved in entrepreneurship can significantly boost the likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur.

Interestingly, in our sample whenever this topic emerged, the majority of our interviewees resented *having such a role model* when starting the entrepreneurial career. They emphasised the value of moral support, understanding and guidance provided by relatives and friends who know what entrepreneurship means. Even knowing women in leadership positions would have been helpful (firm owner in education, Austria). Without the help of “significant others” (the term used by sociologists to name the closest persons in one’s life) even good university studies can be worthless (furniture manufacturing, family firm, HU). Another interviewee complained that her parents were not supportive at all. First the family who was more experienced in crafts did not like that she started education at a bank and then that she became an entrepreneur (financial services, DE).

In the rare cases when women had role models in their environment this kind of support was largely appreciated; either it was assistance and guidance received from friends who had also switched from employment to self-employment in the past (coach, self-employed, HU) or family members. In one Icelandic case the relatives of an interviewee had been entrepreneurs who had been also migrants, providing her with a specific entrepreneurial mindset and ambition (care sector, IS).

#### 5.2.8. Resources used during setting up the business

In the early years of their entrepreneurial activity there had been a wide variety of resources our interviewees were able to use. Taking into consideration the great share of personal service providers in our sample it is not surprising that the most often mentioned resource that contributed to their successful start was the availability of *their personal networks and the trust and reputation* they have accumulated. The second most quoted factor they considered helpful was their opportunity to *pursue economic (especially marketing & business) university studies*, while the third was their *access to bank loans* (e.g. in a firm run in the food industry, Austria). However, as the entrepreneur reported to receive the loan she had had to prove 10 years of experience of managing the company part-time.

Sub-chapter 5.2 dedicated to exploring and understanding motivations, strategies and resources used during setting up an entrepreneurship showed the plethora of motivations women entrepreneurs made reference to while talking about the first years of starting a business, motivations from both the “push” and “pull” categories. In most cases women had had a job as an employee before either because they turned towards entrepreneurship later out of necessity or because they had seen previous work experience as a form of accumulation of experience and financial or social capital. And indeed, the most often referred to resource while starting the entrepreneurial activity was their access to formal and informal networks, while the most lacked resource was that of role models in their environment.



### 5.3. Managing the firm

In a temporal approach in the next section we deal with difficulties experienced and coping strategies used throughout managing the firm. The sub-chapter is divided into two parts: the first shorter section describes how responsibilities are allocated in running the firm, while the second larger part, made up by five sections focus on different levels of experiencing challenges.

#### 5.3.1. Responsibilities within the firm

In cases when our interviewees were not the only owners and/or managers of the firm we asked them to tell us about their responsibilities. In most cases *the division of the tasks follows a “gender line”*.

In case of family businesses, founders or successors management tasks between family members are split according to perceived “gender-related competencies”. In the case of a large Hungarian family firm the brother is responsible for production while his sister takes care of finance and human resources. We found an identical division of work in an Austrian pharmaceutical company, while in other cases (in Germany and Portugal) women owners are also in charge with running CSR activities, communication with universities, and with other external actors, such as the Chamber of Commerce.

When co-owners are not members of the same family we can identify the same pattern: women are more likely to deal with tasks that assume more PR and “backstage” activities: managing the company's financial and sales activities to serving the guests (food service, HU). Whether there is only one owner or several co-owners, being able to employ co-workers is important for the entrepreneur to be able to deal with the important issues in which he or she is competent: management of the company or product development.

#### 5.3.2. Challenges and difficulties

One of our major objectives in this study was to explore the difficulties women entrepreneurs meet in their work. We have summarised these in the following, according to the level they were experienced.

##### 5.3.2.1 On the personal level

Being an entrepreneur may cause a series of difficulties in a woman's private life. Most of these are gender-specific and are connected to creating a balance between the private and the professional life.

The first challenge may be encountered by both men and women, nevertheless, women tend to feel the tension more between the social expectation of avoiding risks and the insecurities of being an entrepreneur. Switching from employment to entrepreneurship can make it difficult to get used to the new life style, especially after decades of being an employee. One needs to re-evaluate the importance of a daily routine, and that of a fixed salary, safety. It is also important to note that social networks otherwise considered as crucial during the start of an



entrepreneurial career, some interviewees have complained because their former networks which they had built as employees eroded while embarking upon self-employment (coach, self-employed, HU):

*„Practically, this is a new start. In this I am just like a career starter, just when I left the university and started working at the age of 25, and this kind of humbleness has to be practiced constantly, and this kind of patience must be practiced during career building. Obviously, you have a lot of routines, you have a lot of connections that make it easier, faster, but we are starting something from the beginning.”* (coach, self-employed, HU)

The rest of the challenges experienced on the personal level are rather specific for women. They can be grouped into two categories. On the one hand *it is difficult to establish a family*, while on the other hand, *when one has family it is difficult to focus on both spheres of life*.

As one interviewee formulated it, the powerful concentration on one's professional and entrepreneurial activity may cause an *“unfulfilled private life”*:

*„[...] well, it is because an entrepreneur does not have a schedule like an employee who goes to work at 8 am and goes home at 4 pm, and after that she does not deal with the company. Obviously, we also have fixed working hours while we work for the company but if it is needed I take home some work or do work at weekends. This means I have to work much more, [than an average employee] and obviously I have much more representation tasks, when for example I have to appear at an event. Here I cannot refuse because it is on weekend or overtime because even if it is on a Saturday, you have to go. We have much less free time.”* (HU, 30s, large enterprise)

On the personal level entrepreneurs experience further difficulties also because *“female entrepreneurs are more selective when choosing a boyfriend”* (self-employed in the financial sector, DE). Among the several gender neutral difficulties faced by managers of firms we find loneliness, the lack of opportunity to discuss work-related problems with others (HU, coach, self-employed). As many interviewees noted, generally speaking, today it is more stressful to be an entrepreneur than before – without defining what “before” meant (HU, large enterprise).

The second group of difficulties are related to the “time famine” experienced especially by women who need to carry the “double burden” of paid work (entrepreneurship) and caring tasks. However, the following interviewee claims that time management can be improved especially after having gained experience as an employee or a manager:

*“It is a huge advantage that I have worked as an employee, and I bring a lot of things (experience) from there, what was bad and good there, obviously both [jobs] have their advantages and disadvantages. I think the amount of work is not necessarily determined by [the type of the job]. But it is said that entrepreneurs do not have a five-day audit calendar, but seven days, but I am trying to monitor this very consciously, I think it is rather a question of personality how much the person wants to work, because I worked a lot as an employee too. It is obviously a different responsibility if one does his own [job]. It was very positive for me that I could coordinate things, for example, in terms of schedule, the aim is to have the work done, and not to be here from 8am to 4 pm and drop the pen out of my hand at 16.”* (light industry, family business, HU)

The double burden, managing the household, caring tasks and paid work, the unreachable work-life balance is making it extremely difficult for women: *“when I go home I do the work of two people”* (furniture manufacturing, family firm, HU, IT self-employed, low income region, Austria). From another point of view, the roles of a “fierce and firm business woman” (required by the entrepreneurial work) and that of a “sensitive artist and woman” are seen as

incompatible. One music education entrepreneur talked about many sleepless nights and added that if she was to start again, she would most probably be *“just a concert flute player”* instead of a businesswoman, since due to the necessity of always being strong she was *“afraid of losing that special sensitivity that you needed as an artist”* (education, Austria).

The difficulty to separate business and private life, especially in the case of family businesses is also often mentioned: *“the music academy is there in thoughts wherever we go or whatever we do”* (education, Austria).

On the personal level family firms represent a special case: many interviewees said that the expectations from family members in business life are high. When within the firm a young person suddenly became the manager of older people whom she had known from childhood and who had been working with the firm for decades it was difficult to behave adequately (family businesses, Hungary).

#### 5.3.2.2 Difficulties in management and decision making

Women entrepreneurs encounter a series of difficulties in their management work. It is important to note that in most cases they do not perceive these challenges in gendered terms.

For instance, many of them argued that *the lack of security* affected not just women's but men's life as well in entrepreneurship: they referred to the insecurity of finance and of the future (food industry, Austria) which was especially a huge challenge after having worked as an employee (consulting, entertainment, IS)

Many of the difficulties women entrepreneurs encounter are related to *managing interpersonal relations*. For instance, when relying on friends and former classmates it is difficult to relate to them as a superior and a friend at the same time, which they might take advantage of, not always obeying the rules (education services, Austria). At the same time, while networks represent important resource they use during setting up the firm, it is also difficult or embarrassing for some of them to approach relatives, friends and acquaintances as possible clients (coach, self-employed, HU). These entrepreneurs assume that adequate marketing skills would improve their abilities to use their own personal networks to sell their services. On the other hand, some of our interviewees (especially of migrant background) lack those types of local networks that would provide them with assistance or would be a market for their products or services (care sector, IS).

The second type of difficulties is being experienced in relation to *the lack of economic or other skills and know-how*. At the borderline between technical and social problems an entrepreneur complained about the challenge to delegate tasks especially when the company is growing:

*„I had to learn to assign tasks, to delegate and not to do everything by myself because at such a large company, you cannot do that anymore.”* (HU, family business)

Lack of knowledge in pricing (coach, self-employed, HU) or marketing causes further difficulties, just as the competition with multi-national companies (RO, woman in her 50s, food industry).

Many women emphasised that they would be willing to accomplish (additional) courses and entrepreneurship training programmes. However, in many cases it is either the lack of course and training offer or the unavailability of time that prevent them from enrolling in such programmes (Romania).

#### 5.3.2.3 Family businesses

In the case of family businesses an often encountered problem is again not specific for women, but refers to *the (in)adequate management of family relations within the family firm*: conflicts, the division of rights and duties (who should and is entitled to sign documents etc.) (furniture manufacturing, family firm, HU).

#### 5.3.2.4 Access to capital

Many of the companies are being started with a low level of capital, or building on the women's or families' savings.

Although it is not common at all, we managed to include in the sample a few women entrepreneurs who attempted to access to investment. In one case, the interviewee said that as the company was evolving and growing, the two original founders talked to various investors who either showed interest in the company or were at least willing to explore possibilities. The experience was mixed. In general, these investors were males. The two start uppers sometimes met obvious scepticism or lack of interest in what these two young women could do in terms of managing their business. But they also met with investors who shew fairer approach in their assessments. Finally, due to different reasons, no agreement was made with external financiers. According to the interviewee, one of the main benefits of not accepting new investors into the ownership structure leaves the sense of freedom. By selling a stake in your company to an external party, you lose independence, and that independence has value (manufacturing, IS).

A German landscape architect had no capital at the beginning, therefore the start was carried out in a low-cost manner. The interviewee reported how difficult it was to get even a little credit from the bank when starting her business. Banks did not believe that she could be successful in a sector which is dominated by men. By networking in politics (on the local and regional level) she got in touch with a director of a bank and with the help of such direct contacts she got access to a small credit (landscape architect, DE). A Spanish entrepreneur considered that companies were having difficulties in accessing financing, especially when they were not going well *"and if you were a woman, that difficulty grew"* (educational provider & consulting, ES).

However, the access to capital is not always a source of difficulty. In the case of technological and software start-ups stakeholders consider it is easier to obtain capital: an entrepreneur acquired financing from venture capital (VC) investors and business angels and a few months later they launched a gamified mobile app for management. Today, she has moved on to a new venture, which is under development and is receiving support through investor seed funding and from business accelerators. On the other hand, banks regularly require collateral for any loan, and that is an obstacle. Private investors are better suited for a nascent start-up company.

She also differentiates between VC investors and business angels, preferring the more involved or attentive approach of business angels, which she relates to the fact that they are investing and managing their own assets. While the VC investors do not share that same mindset and communicate with more focus on perhaps the immediate cashflow and accounting concerns (tech start-up, IS).

When planning to expand the business the owner expects for non-refundable financial support that does not condition eligibility on willingness to hire (additional) employees. She is distrustful towards bank loans and has got lower risk tolerance.

#### 5.3.2.5 Attitudes of the environment & discrimination

Although in most cases women entrepreneurs refuse to see any discrimination or significant disadvantages that would affect their activities, the interviews have revealed some of the most typical ones.

Generally, women entrepreneurs working in male dominated sectors were most likely to recall experiences in some forms of discrimination which they did not regard as the source of significant disadvantage (HU, large company). The most often mentioned difficulty stemming from the biased attitudes of the environment was “not being taken seriously” as a young woman entrepreneur (business woman in arts, Austria) or being treated with some form of “kind ignorance”: although men were kind to her, they did not take her seriously. As one interviewee characterised it in arts women were put in boxes such as “cute blonde”. A mentor taught our interviewee how to use her emotionality wisely (as a musician woman in the Austrian business sphere). In other cases, women managers experienced discrimination or some form of underestimation during negotiations (former manager, now a self-employed coach, Hungary & furniture manufacturing, family firm, HU).

Our study has also revealed that women entrepreneurs who belonged to particular disadvantaged groups were more likely to have to face some form of discrimination. Single mothers form one of such groups (business woman in arts, Austria). A disabled woman interviewee working in Austria claimed the following:

*“If women have an aim, if they are strong and critical they are called the angry witches. If a man has the same qualities, people think that he is self-conscious, is a good leader and does his things very well. Women are still expected to be kind and supportive by the majority.”* (education, Austria)

She was of the opinion that women as entrepreneurs had rarely any advantage that would stem from being women. She recalled her frequent experience being at meetings, where men and their opinions were being considered first. She had to be pushy to be heard at all and for she had to bring in more arguments and be rather loud to be considered. Nevertheless, she was perceiving a slow change and hoped that it would be easier for the young people.

## 5.4. Support received

After exploring the most common difficulties met by women entrepreneurs this section is dedicated to presenting the ways business women received support throughout their activity. First we concentrate on the help they got as persons, then as entrepreneurs during their early and established phases of their careers.

### 5.4.1. On the personal level

The most important sources of support on the personal level are the family members, relatives and friends. Family members can provide assistance in three ways: the first is by being understanding and not having high wage expectations from mothers with young children, the second is by sharing the caring tasks more equally and the third is by taking up some of the household tasks temporarily.

The importance of an *understanding attitude* was highlighted for example by a woman working as self-employed in the IT sector who said that her husband did not expect his wife to provide a full wage while also taking care of the home, but *“regarded family work as work and never forced me to earn money”*. She stressed that it was a relief for her to know that the house and the bare necessities of life were taken care for by her husband's income. The interviewee considered herself as *“additional earner”*. Partners and family members can also support early career women entrepreneurs besides helping out with household chores, also with their trust, patience and advice (coach, self-employed & furniture manufacturing, family firm, HU).

Women entrepreneurs also relied on the help of family members, relatives, friends or former colleagues in child minding on a case by case basis (IT self-employed, Austria, light industry, family firm, HU, food service, HU). Although this kind of help might be temporary it is especially valued by single mothers (business woman in arts, Austria).

Lastly the willingness to re-negotiate division of labour in the household is the greatest help a business woman can get, for example when the partner or the husband decides to stay at home on parental leave.

The lack of support can make the start of a business more difficult. In the already mentioned case the parents with low level of education of the woman interviewee were anything but supportive, as they were reluctant to understand why she took any risks. *“They were extremely scared what would happen to me when I get sick”*. Another woman entrepreneur received no support from grandparents or from co-workers when she became a single mother (psychologist & expert, Austria)

#### 5.4.2. In starting the firm: mentoring, advice from established entrepreneurs, more experienced entrepreneurs or other experts

There are many studies which show that advice from *mentors and peer employers* can be of real help when starting a firm. For example, friends who have similar experience can become role models and mentors at the same time, preparing the early career entrepreneur for the typical and biggest threats and difficulties and giving advice on how to avoid or solve them:

*„Many persons have left multinational organizations before me, so I had a way ahead. They could give me advice what to look out for in the beginning to avoid big disappointments, and how I should prepare this process. How much time I should leave myself – I am quite impatient –, but that is how I try to be patient because I know it will not work from one moment to another.”* (coach, self-employed, Hungary)

In most cases help received from the so-called “*weak ties*” proved to be useful: when starting the business a friend’s mother had been helping one of our interviewees as expert and later she also relied on a tax consultant (IT self-employed, Austria). In another case a wide network of friends helped a team of young entrepreneurs with advice for free (food service, HU) or someone else was helped by family members setting up a website (consulting, IS). Partners were also very valuable, because they could help out in the firm (food service, HU); others wished they had had a partner, a co-owner (landscape architect, DE).

When there was no such assistance or mentoring available, (women) entrepreneurs were willing to pay for it. An owner of a family business, while working towards taking over the family firm as its future single manager she hired coaches and participated at trainings on a case by case basis to acquire the necessary skills and competences. Individual work with coaches proved to be more focused on the person’s needs (textile industry, DE).

#### 5.4.3. In managing the firm

Throughout the management activities our interviewees received approximately *the same forms of support*. In managing the family firm one of our interviewees received guidance from an older friend who had been working with the firm since its foundation (HU, family business). Others relied on networks, most often formed by other mothers working from home. The internet and the phone proved to be useful too: the contacts to her clients were either mediated by the designers, but rather by mail/skype/phone than in person (IT self-employed, Austria).

*Networks* are powerful tool for women entrepreneurs, especially in the case of personal service providers: the network of personal contacts, “word-of-mouth recommendations” (coach, self-employed, Austria), or the trust is the most important capital in this activity (coach, self-employed, HU, entertainment, IS). Many women entrepreneurs join formal or virtual (internet mediated) networks, most generally made up only of women (e.g. in Romania “Transylvanian Women Entrepreneurs”) in order to feel comfortable when having a question or encountering a problem.



Nevertheless, in the study some women have emphasised the *risks of relying too heavily on family members*: they were difficult to replace in case of a crisis; moreover, family relations and tensions could have a strong (unwanted) impact on the business life (IT self-employed, Austria).

### 5.5. Strategies of creating work-life balance

Although the creation of work-life balance can be difficult for male entrepreneurs, as well, this topic is crucial, and as such it is being most often addressed to women. In the followings we explore the most widely used strategies of our interviewees.

- 1) *Almost no private life*: focusing exclusively on work may be seen as one form of tackling work-life balance issues:

*"The working day lasts for 8 hours, but when the company is yours, you are always turning the business around. So far I have not considered raising a family, since my world revolves around my company".* (construction SME, ES)

As a part of this strategy some women decide to postpone childbearing and family formation in order to be able to provide financial stability first (landscape architect, DE).

- 2) Switching from employment to self-employment is a means of having a *more flexible schedule that can be adapted to family life*. The experience of a self-employed woman in the financial sector (DE) underlines this: the interviewee is convinced that her business is compatible with being a mother. She knows other brokers who take their children with them when visiting customers. Her experiences show that entrepreneurs are more relaxed when facing challenges of being mother than employees.
- 3) *"Keeping it small scale"*: often issues related to work-life balance or more simply put, the lack of sufficient time available for entrepreneurial activities *prevent business women from expanding the activities of the firm* or transforming it from a self-employment or a one-woman enterprise into a larger company (Romania).
- 4) *Outsourcing*: Single mothers who return early to work often employ several people, benefit from the help of a permanent baby sitter, or rely on family for babysitting, and also try to improve time management skills (business woman in arts, Austria);
- 5) In the case of a family business (husband & wife, no children) our interviewee considered that the key to a balanced life was flexible schedule, *drawing the limits between work and private life*, and trying not to work too much (the owners of a communication and advertising company, rural areas, Austria). In another case sharing the chores equally with the boyfriend (no children) was seen as a good strategy (light industry, family business, HU).
- 6) *Sharing the caring and household chores more equally* is one of the best solutions to creating work-life balance, according to many interviewees. When the partner/husband decides to stay at home on parental leave, "one week after giving birth I was back to work again" (food industry, Austria, food service, HU)).
- 7) Many women decide to wait until the children become adults until they start a business, being convinced that *hard work is incompatible with dedicated mothering*. As one

interviewee formulated, she was reluctant to leave her children with a nanny (large company, education, Austria).

- 8) Flexible forms of work are the major reason for women to start an enterprise, especially because it allows them to work in irregular hours and/or from home. As an interviewee noted, when her second child was born, she was already working from home full time. She took two weeks off after giving birth and started working again very soon “*because clients don’t wait until you are ready again*”. Nevertheless, she stressed that she “*did only the most important stuff*” at this time. Working from home as a mother of two proved to be a challenge but for her this was the way she wanted to live her life. She liked that she could work whenever and wherever she wanted to – even though her affinity to work at night had lessened in the past years. She stated that when she was not well rested in the morning because of a night-shift in her office, the whole family suffered. However, it was difficult to reach a long focus when working from home (self-employed in IT, Austria).
- 9) Women entrepreneurs adopt different strategies when their companies are in the *established phase: they have enough time and enough money to distance themselves from the everyday work of the company*. As a woman formulated, she has reached a point in her life where she can reap what she has sown in the past. She seemed content with her life and her achievements (pharmaceutical company, family firm, Austria). Once companies grow enough for the owner to afford hiring an assistant the quantity of work decreases. (landscape architect, DE)

The interviews revealed a wide range of strategies women entrepreneurs developed to adjust their working time to the caring duties they had to fulfil. Nevertheless, in most cases their primary concern was to find adequate working arrangements that would fit their already defined caring duties. In most cases women did not aim to re-negotiate the traditional division of household work, not even founding an enterprise. In the following we will explore the most widespread interpretations of women entrepreneurs’ situation in which their strategies and actions are embedded.

## 6. Women entrepreneurs’ situation in society

The sixth chapter focuses on the most common views and opinions regarding women entrepreneur’s chances and opportunities in the business life. We found it important to deal with the views of stakeholders because these perceptions inform not only their actions, but also their expectations towards trainings and entrepreneurial programmes.

According to the majority of interviewees women entrepreneurs nowadays are more accepted by society than 15–20 years ago, which decreases the difference between male and female entrepreneurs. The view according to which women’s and men’s opportunities do not differ from each other in the business life is sometimes complemented by personal experiences reflecting a different reality. In the following we first present the opinions claiming that there are no



differences, and then we turn to those that offer explanations for the inequalities women entrepreneurs need to face.

### 6.1. No difference between male and female entrepreneurs

The approach according to which there is no difference between men and women in entrepreneurship we call the *gender blind approach*. It is very typical for interview of focus situations for interviewees or participants to argue on the theoretical level that conditions of entrepreneurial activity are the same for men and women, however, when starting to talk about personal experiences they realise they themselves have encountered female specific difficulties. The “no disadvantages” claim was mentioned by the majority of Austrian, Romanian, Spanish, German, Icelandic, Portuguese or Hungarian interviewees, arguing that opportunities are equal and in general, economic life treats individuals in the same way. Moreover, some participants in an Austrian focus group interview preferred to speak about entrepreneurs in general, regardless of their gender: their roles, the need for courage and confidence.

*"More and more value is given to the work performed by women. In my sector I believe that there are more and more opportunities for us. We see ourselves with that necessary strength so that our actions are taken seriously. We are preparing ourselves more and more to do jobs that have a lot of responsibility". (SME in IT, ES)*

Some women specified that the lack of discrimination is rather true for the women dominated sectors, otherwise no specific forces hinder women's activities in the business life. This approach renders the unequal share of household work as belonging to the private life which should not be counted as part of the economic inequalities.

### 6.2. Explanations, reasons of the differences

Most interviewees were willing to consider to search for possible explanations for the gender differences in the entrepreneurial world. We have clustered the most frequent opinions as follows:

#### 6.2.1. Women's “character”, her values and socialisation

The most popular explanation for the differences between women's and men's different positions in the entrepreneurial world were connected to the differences in their personalities, whether of biological or social nature. The most widely mentioned differences were the following:

- women are more emotional, characterised by a fluctuating mood and are more intuitive. Some interviewees added that this did not affect their decision making, but improved their understanding and relations with their employees (furniture manufacturing, family firm, HU);
- women have less understanding of technical details;
- women have less developed networking skills and willingness to participate at events (women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Austria); also women have less developed soft skills (expert, decision maker, DE)

- women are different in how they think and talk about their business (consulting, Austria),
- women tend to have fewer ideas and tend to be less open to criticism (large company, education, Austria);
- women have low level of self-confidence (expert, Hungary, entrepreneur, Romania). Personal qualities such as self-confidence or courage „come naturally for men” (consulting, IS);
- there are no differences between traits and personalities, but expectations from the entrepreneurship: “an entrepreneurship is always about making money for men, this is not that clear for women, a lot of time is spent on it” (expert, Hungary). “Women work less target oriented and go slowly” (expert & decision maker, DE);
- the very motivations to start a company differ with men and women: while for instance a midlife crisis tends to push women to entrepreneurship (seen as a new start of the career), men are expected to earn even more to provide a stable life for their families, thus they are more likely „to stay in the squirrel wheel” (coach, self-employed, Hungary). As the participants of one of the Austrian focus group interview put it: while men’s goal is “to change their bank accounts”, women entrepreneurs aim at “changing society”,
- women are more perseverant and if they experience discrimination, they become even more determined to reach their goals (marketing, HU);
- women look for security and avoid to take risk; less developed soft skills (expert, decision maker, DE);
- while men are “*more outgoing, standing in the front line and having less trouble, presenting themselves and their ideas in front of possible investors or other audiences*”, women are “*more idealistic and less self-conscious in their decisions*” (Austrian focus participants);
- at the same time, while male entrepreneurs can be best defined in terms of “Millennial Start-Uppers”, the female entrepreneur corresponds to the “traditional stereotype of the self-sacrificing woman”.

Although some of the opinions have a “blaming the victim” layer, the complexity of the issue of biological and/or socialisation-related differences” is shown by the following quote:

*“Women have more organizational and empathic capacities than men, which leads us to create a good work environment, which is essential in order to make a company successful. We also have more capacity for dialogue than men, which helps to resolve conflicts”.* (SME in IT, ES)

### 6.2.2. The “double burden”

One of the major limits to equality in social and economic life in general is the unequal share of caring and household tasks between men and men. The sociological concept of the “double burden” reflects that although women’s employment has increased significantly in the past years, the *largely invisible and unpaid household and caring work is still considered as women’s task*. In Austria, for example, although some fathers have begun to become more involved in

their children's lives, it is still a problem that most women have to choose between career and family (large company, education, Austria). In spite of recent promising trends of rethinking traditional roles, men only rarely use the "papa months" even in Austria (large company, education, Austria).

*This inequality causes a series of difficulties which are not even observed.* For example, women are usually unable to attend networking events organised at evening hours if they have children, or even women company owners consider that once their women employees become pregnant, the company "looses" them, as it is difficult to manage such cases (large company, education, Austria). Entrepreneurial women who want to have children can face disadvantages due to maternity leave. Longer maternity leaves may affect the future of the companies, and this is one reason why women successors in family firms are likely to give their places either to their brothers or their husband (light industry, family firm, HU). Having a full-time career in a world of work which values long hours as the criterion of proper determination:

*"Women are much more limited compared to men. It is clearly seen in courses, conferences, meetings ..., because quite often schedules make impossible to attend if you are a woman. It is true that women have entered the labour market, but the family burden remains the same. This makes the task of running a successful business even more difficult". (services SME, ES)*

### 6.2.3. Women's "different" behaviour as entrepreneurs, different ways of operation or management style

If character is the set of traits that characterise a personality, largely invisible to the environment, behaviour is the visible layer of our social existence, the way one acts and relates to other people. Of course, one can best imagine behaviour as being grounded in personality. In our study we encounter a view according to which *women as entrepreneurs tend to behave differently, to manage the firm in a specific way*. These are being considered as the second type of reasons for the gender inequalities in entrepreneurship.

These aspects are the following:

- *more men participate at events organised for supporting entrepreneurship, and tailored for obtaining investments.* One interviewee claims that one can hardly find women among investors, and she thinks that the reason is that men have more self-confidence, dare to fail and even make fun of it. Women go less to these events (90% of participants are men). Male investors tend to finance men's projects, says a women's entrepreneurial organisation representative from Austria. Women are less likely to attend networking events together with men because these are seen as "power games" between owners of bigger companies (expert, women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Hungary);
- *sectoral segregation* is also seen as one of the consequences for women's different entrepreneurial attitudes. Sectoral segregation means the concentration of women owned companies in the care sector and various forms of social entrepreneurship. Men,

on the other hand, are concentrated in STEM related companies or in start-ups (women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Austria). This also means that *women tend to choose sectors or fields of activity that are less profitable, as they are less interested in money and more in the social cause*: “self-fulfilment results in a limited profitability” (expert, women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Hungary);

- *women care more about the impact*, the values and less about the money (women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Austria);
- *women tend to delay setting up a business* because they strive for stability at the beginning of their careers. Being an employee guarantees them paid maternity leave, while being self-employed they cannot have this certainty (women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Austria);
- *the expectations of male and female entrepreneurs* are also different, but it is difficult to generalise. Women are seen more realistic, they tend to think regionally (thus focusing on the local markets), try to secure safety, and at the same time they underestimate their own potential. Whereas men “go for big”: they have a bigger vision (which is not always sustainable, but still!). Men tend to think globally from day 1 on. Among start-ups this mind-set is really important: this determines how you create your service and your product. Most women tend to enter entrepreneurship with a particular goal: to make a living for themselves. At the early stages they rarely think about establishing a company with a lot of employees. Men, on the contrary, even if they have not started the company yet are already looking for investors, and continuously ask about funds (Vienna expert).

#### 6.2.4. Contextual factors

The third cluster of explanations deals with the social, economic and ideological factors shaping women's and men's possibilities in the entrepreneurial world. Some of these factors are related to discrimination, others are originating from those institutions that are crucial in entrepreneurs' careers.

##### 6.2.4.1 *The role of education in promoting entrepreneurship among women and in general*

Education considered to be outdated, it promotes lexical knowledge instead of entrepreneurial mindset (women's entrepreneurial association, Austria). In universities there are almost no courses on entrepreneurship: even if there are some initiatives (grants, financial support, 1-day programmes), these are not enough to change the mindset, the thinking about risks and entrepreneurship (large company, education, Austria). An Austrian expert claims that currently there are about 190,000 students in higher educational institutions in Vienna, but only 2% of all curricula provide at least partial information about entrepreneurship. He is very proud that the *University of Veterinary Medicine is the 1<sup>st</sup> one in Vienna to introduce mandatory courses on entrepreneurship to all students* (Founders' centre, Viennese universities).

The lack of practical education in higher education is of course gender neutral but it affects arts programmes more where women tend to form a majority. Universities in general fail to prepare students for independent work.

#### 6.2.4.2 Discrimination & social and gender norms are changing very slowly

Social norms regulating people's behaviour and expectations transmit double standard towards men and women. These, along with discrimination, make it more difficult for women to succeed in entrepreneurship:

*"Women are continuously told that they cannot manage and run a business alone, still they want to start an entrepreneurship, only a few of them are bored housewives..."*  
(representative of a women entrepreneurs' association, Hungary)

There were several interviews in which women talked about meetings and negotiations where they were looked upon by male partners, in an attempt to show their superiority:

*„[...] The gentleman there became very professional and used professional terms, he thought I would not understand what he was saying, the antidote to this was that I went into those professional details he might not understand and he did not hear earlier. So in that situation it happened that he started to use professional jargon and then I also started to use my jargon of plastic industry, so I succeeded in this. So this could be taught".* Now she does not feel any form of discrimination as she learned how to handle the difficult situations.  
(CEO, industry, Hungary)

A woman manager was treated differently at negotiations by fellow managers because she is a woman or whenever she was regarded as a "quota woman" (light industry, family business, HU):

*"I've already had a situation when [...] a professional discussion was held at a conference, and at the end someone came to me to ask me to participate on a round-table discussion because there would be a conference in a month and there is no woman participant yet. And then I said okay, but I would be much happier if they asked me to participate because I'm an expert of that field. So, I'm faced with this."*

Social expectations – transmitted through family, schools, teachers, labour offices – tend to "push" women towards "feminine" jobs and fields of activity (landscape architect, DE).

#### 6.2.4.3 Access to funding

Male investors are more likely to invest in male led companies, as they see younger start-uppers as their younger selves. In addition, male start-uppers are more open to apply for such funding (Vienna City Hall, F). Interviewees also emphasised the risk that customers pay smaller fees for female service providers than to males (landscape architect, DE)

*"Entrepreneurship requires more contribution from women than from men."* (landscape architect, DE)

The world of entrepreneurs and of start-uppers is very masculine, which is further emphasised by support programmes attended in majority by men. "The field is male." (consulting, Austria)

#### 6.2.4.4 Low level of support

The low level of advocacy for women's equality at all levels of society (schools, the state) (expert, Hungary) is very often doubled by the lack of support from family member, friends (representative of a women entrepreneurs' association, Hungary)

*“Even today, it is completely natural to say that women should stay in the kitchen and raise the children. I don’t think a man would be asked by his father that ‘my son, when will you have a proper job?’ (in case he wants to start a small business). Women, on the contrary, are often asked such questions. So, many of them do not even start the business.” (representative of a women entrepreneurs’ association, Hungary)*

## 7. Support programmes for progressive and active women entrepreneurs

This chapter summarises the most important support programmes for women entrepreneurs encountered in the countries included in the study. First we focus on experience accumulated by the women entrepreneurs, then on the best practices described by interviewed experts.

### 7.1. Women entrepreneurs’ experience with support programmes

The following good practices have been enumerated by our interviewees:

#### 7.1.1. Austria

- 1) A **start-up supporting programme** offered at one of the Austrian universities:
  - learned: pitching, making a business plan;
  - very male dominated, strongly connected to science & the world of start-ups.
- 2) **Funding from the City of Vienna:** hard to access it, but “we would never have started that business without this founding”.

#### 7.1.2. Hungary

- 1) Several **tenders and regular (monthly) forms of assistance** encourage young entrepreneurs, regardless of their gender.
- 2) Indirect impact on the encouragement of entrepreneurship: **student organisations that provide lectures and organise networking events**, seen as the most important assets for wannabe entrepreneurs.
- 3) **“Dobbantó” programme** offered by an institute committed to supporting entrepreneurship where they concentrate on assisting women to start their business career.

#### 7.1.3. Iceland

- 1) An interviewee participated in a group organised from below, by peer women entrepreneurs as a **support group**: she has tried to approach networks of Icelandic female entrepreneurs and attended event organized by them. The experience was rather bland, she felt it was not a very open and supportive environment, and again iterated the importance of network in connectedness in Icelandic society. Furthermore, she mentioned a kind of a gap in the entrepreneurial support network. Sometimes she was considered over-qualified to be admitted in such support programmes;
- 2) **Grant schemes** for entrepreneurs in Iceland;

- 3) Various **start-up accelerators, competitions and workshops**;
- 4) **"Business Admin" programs**;
- 5) Certain **funds that specifically support women** offering project grants;
- 6) **Business accelerator** being planned for **music and creative industries**;
- 7) **FKA (Association of Women Business Leaders in Iceland)**. Upon noticing the lack of representation of younger women in that association, she was one of a few that took the initiative to start "FKA Framtíð" (e. FKA Future), a sub-committee within FKA focusing on young Icelandic businesswomen. This committee aims to provide personal mentoring for women, access to workshops and to help them build their professional network.
- 8) **Icelandic and European development funds**. She considers them helpful but has diverted attention away from the Icelandic funds as she feels their approach is too narrow and perhaps a bit misplaced.

#### 7.1.4. Germany

- 1) **Sectoral associations**, such as the Chamber of Architects provided assistance in elaborating a business plan:
  - professional associations such as the one for brokers can assist early career entrepreneurs: she has to pay an annual membership fee and receives suitable support, e.g. legal advice, news from the financial sector. The same association provided initial coaching to start business as a broker. This membership offers a certain degree of security.
- 2) **Networks of young people** (not necessarily women entrepreneurs): those networks can be used to get in touch with potential customers and to be inspired for developing business.

#### 7.1.5. Spain

In Spain almost all women business owners have participated in some forms of trainings targeting young or women entrepreneurs, e.g.:

- 1) The co-owner of an SME working in the construction sector had participated and is grateful for a **wide range of trainings in the field of entrepreneurship**.
- 2) At the time of creating the company another entrepreneur relied on the **CADE (Andalusian Center for Entrepreneurship)** of Vejer de la Frontera (Province of Cadiz) *"They treated us wonderfully well and thanks to them it was very easy for us to do it"*. Even nowadays she accesses as many trainings as possible to improve herself.
 

*"In that sense I had to train myself later. In some cases in private institutions and paying and, in other cases, through some free formative program of public institutions". (education provider & consulting, ES)*
- 3) Some companies were created with the *"unemployment funds that corresponded to me that I anticipated in a single payment and obtained a **grant from the Regional Government for new entrepreneurs**"*.



## 7.2. Experts' experience with support programmes

In our study experts were able to offer different set of experiences and point of view regarding already existing entrepreneurial programmes. In the following we list them on a country by country basis.

### 7.2.1. Austria

*Female Founders*, an organisation supporting female entrepreneurs & start-uppers in Austria

- interviewee's job: *"designing programmes, learning new things and connecting women by organising events and maintaining a platform of female founders"*. Organising business networking events, workshops focusing on skills instead of knowledge, creating opportunity, space for women, space for this topic;
- a spinoff of Founders' Centre supporting university students.

*Austrian Angel Investors' Association*

- initiated "Angelina project": women are given the opportunity to invest smaller amounts of money, to invest at all and women entrepreneurs to gain access to investment capital.

*Founders' centres or Gründungszentrum at Viennese universities*

- interviewee's job: promoting entrepreneurship through different types of programmes;
- they offer a whole variety of skills workshops (e.g. creativity and design, storytelling, idea generation, lean canvas model of business), a finance academy (how you can finance your business idea), etc. What they are not doing is incubation or business acceleration. Over the three years the "Founders' centre" at the Vienna University of Business and Economics they have hosted about 10,000 students in 350-400 events.
- mixed group settings ("Founders' centre" at the Vienna University of Business and Economics);
- their flagship programme (The Entrepreneurship Avenue) is an entrepreneurial event series, which consists of workshops (pitching your idea, building up teams etc.) in form of a road show at various universities. This year (2018) they are working with 1500 students from 17 higher educational institutions. ("Founders' centre" at the Vienna University of Business and Economics).
- Female Founder Talks (as a mean to addressing lack of women in business life): awareness raising, providing role models, 99% of the audience: women ("Founders' centre" at the Vienna University of Business and Economics).

"Austrian female founders project at the university"<sup>2</sup>: the start-up scene is *"very testosterone-driven. It is all about who is bigger and who is stronger and who is better; and I think, and what I have also found in the Austrian female founders report is that this is not something that is very appealing to many women to play by these rules. So frankly, that is a specific*

<sup>2</sup> See at: [http://www.wtz-ost.at/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Report\\_Female\\_Founders\\_16.pdf](http://www.wtz-ost.at/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Report_Female_Founders_16.pdf) (15.02.2019)



*field and I think the **boys shall play in their sandpit** to some extent". ("Founders' centre" at the Vienna University of Business and Economics)*

- evidence based approach: conducting own studies and also making use of existing research results (e.g. GUESSS) ("Founders' centre" at the Vienna University of Business and Economics).

*Official business promotion agency:*

- general mission of the agency: to promote existing businesses, knowledge transfer (free of charge consulting for people thinking about starting their business, having technical difficulties). Besides, they organise awareness events, workshops, networking events etc. They work closely with universities to create more awareness for students so that they also see entrepreneurship as a career option. They also develop urban development projects involving as many stakeholders as possible to push forward the innovative character of the city of Vienna. Their 3<sup>rd</sup> main pillar is funding: they have 30 million euros per year to innovative projects in different areas. (Vienna)
- most of their programmes have a gender aspect: they have extra funding for female led projects and also for female led companies ("Frauenbonus"). They also have special calls for women, e.g. Fempower call in ICT, for projects only led by women or projects targeting women (the case was illustrated through projects in artificial intelligence targeting gender bias). (City Hall, Vienna). Positive career impact of Frauenbonus. They offer support to women in the early stages of entrepreneurship.
- a *small incubation project for women only*: it involves a month-long preparation phase for the women which is followed by a match-making between an experienced entrepreneur (male or female) and a woman who is about to start a business. Afterwards, they have monthly meet-ups, where they discuss various business-related topics. (City Hall Vienna)
- "Future jobs fair": programmes targeting children who are shown different role models with different background (Vienna City Hall).

### 7.2.2. Hungary

*Training programmes available as paid services for women (based on an expert interview).*

They can be divided into three elements:

- 1) *Building communities*: the groups work as self-help groups, their members often meet after the training periods, raising self-awareness, developing communication skills, providing advocacy for women's equality to make participants more aware of women's situation and opportunities in the business world. These trainings are not only a way to educate woman but also to support them.
- 2) Providing "*hard knowledge*": finance, business plans.

- 3) *Socialisation for the entrepreneurial role*: what does it mean to be an entrepreneur, risks, solutions, strategies.

*Programmes organised by a representative organisation of Hungarian female entrepreneurs:*

- 1) *'Open Day'*: it is a regularly held event in every month, anyone can join, but mainly women come. Experienced entrepreneurs and various professionals are invited to give informal lectures on different topics (i.e.: tax rules, Facebook marketing, copyrights, GDPR, issues particularly relevant for women such as how to maintain a higher level of comfort when networking). It is also an event for networking, which is particularly important, because as the interviewee said, many events in the business world are visited mainly by men, although they are not announced as men-only events. The women entrepreneurs who used to attend the 'open days' continuously share their experience about participating in this kind of events of the business world. They say that these occasions are not about gaining or sharing knowledge but are about men participating in power games. In addition, women do not attend these business events in large numbers because these events are not designed for small entrepreneurs such as the majority of women are.
- 2) *Participation in larger international projects with other Hungarian NGOs.*
- 3) *Exclusive training programmes for future and already active women entrepreneurs*: for participants with diverse background, in different phases of their business endeavour. Main aims and activities:
  - a) *"hard knowledge"*: how to write a business plan;
  - b) *women's empowerment*: women's situation in society, strengthening their identities as entrepreneurs (e.g. it was mentioned that many women who arrive from the countryside work in their family business. It is often found that they run the business although they do not consider themselves entrepreneurs. They often say that they help their husband who is the 'real entrepreneur'.)

### 7.2.3. Germany

1) Local level organisation of Germany's biggest association: *"Association of Young Entrepreneurs and Leaders"* with very high reputation in the region. Their general approach is the following: several programs are launched to create a founding culture at universities. Also, several universities adapted curricula in order to offer seminars for founders. Their goals are the following:

- *Development of personality* through exchange of information and experience and assumption of responsibility;
- *Active engagement with regional development* and its economic impact;
- *Promoting the understanding of entrepreneurial thinking* in public.

Among their major projects and events, the Night of education, Education compass and Business Forum can be mentioned. While the first two are focused on promoting vocational educational

training, the Business Forum is more dedicated to supporting entrepreneurship. That event starts with a keynote speech and is followed by an informal networking. In general, the association promotes innovative entrepreneurship. They consult founders and successor of existing businesses and promote self-employment. The intensity of the support provided depends on the members of the local association. Interviewee admits that the support is more given by networking than by individual actions. However, the networking is done extensively. Among its members the share of women is very low (reflecting German realities) and there are no special programmes dedicated to women (entrepreneurs) (business angel and leader of an NGO supporting young entrepreneurship and leadership, Germany).

- 2) *Governmental organisation supporting women to reach higher level positions in economy:*
  - interregional collaboration and in designing programs to support women. Particularly she is interested in life-long-learning and helps universities to develop courses for ex-students and business people (decision maker, DE)
  - the other expert works for women to continue the academic success in their careers, whether as future professor or – more relevant for iFempower – as founders. Concept is particularly interesting as a mentorship program is implemented. In a tandem partnership with a professionally experienced mentor the mentee is being supported in her professional and personal development. Another ongoing project: “Today at the university – tomorrow’s entrepreneur”.
- 3) State of Baden-Württemberg currently supports 17 universities in field of *supporting start-up enterprises*. The Contest under the title “Academic Seed Accelerator Program Baden-Württemberg” is also relevant to this topic.
- 4) An ESF-Project has been launched under the title “*Promotion of young female scientists*”. It provides coaching, training, mentoring, habilitations for more women in management positions in science and business (not particularly to become entrepreneur, but this is a promoted option).
- 5) Several *start-up events* organised in Baden-Württemberg in 2019.
- 6) *Junior Chamber* (chairperson & self-employed in the financial services, DE).

# Recommendations

## 8. Recommendations to improve women's entrepreneurial opportunities

The last chapter of the research report focuses on summarising interviewees' thoughts regarding possible and potentially useful ways to increase and improve women's access to entrepreneurship. The ideas included in this chapter are based on female entrepreneurs' and experts own experience and also on their opinions regarding women's role in society and economic life. First we will talk about how society in general and its institutions should contribute to generating change and in the last section we focus on inputs we received from our interviewees regarding training programmes.

### 8.1. General thoughts

Women's position in society cannot be improved unless there are general policies that tackle the major factors creating disadvantages. However, as we pointed out earlier, there is an important segment among our interviewees, especially among successful woman entrepreneurs, who do not see gender as an important factor and would recommend a gender-blind approach. They argue that there is *"nothing to be done, since there are no specific problems women have to face, there are no disadvantages"* (pharmaceutical company, family firm, Austria).

*„I do not feel the need to distinguish between male and female entrepreneurs so much. As a woman I am very pleased not to see myself differently, male and female entrepreneurs are the same for me, so I do not feel good if I am treated differently just because I am a woman. And the same applies for the management, thanks God they [at the management] have accepted me, so I do not feel [being a woman at management] any advantage or disadvantage. I find it good that we are equal.” (HU, woman in her thirties, rural area, large enterprise)*

Similarly, another interviewee argued she did not believe in quotas, only in skills and knowledge. Other than that she did not have any other solution, except for flexibility and plan B (large company, education, Austria). Therefore, many of the entrepreneurs we talked to had no real thoughts regarding solutions, except for *"[m]aybe, she puts forward, one does a start-up when one is very young or waits until her children are big enough so that the mother has more time for her own things."* (large company, education, Austria). Lastly, as an Icelandic entrepreneur put it, no special programmes for women were necessary, especially not financial support, because women were more risk averse, than men (manufacturing, IS).

An interviewee highlighted the lack of need for programs specifically designed for women (business angel and leader of an NGO supporting young entrepreneurship and leadership, Germany), while a Spanish entrepreneur emphasized the necessity of a holistic approach:

*"the issue of supporting women must be addressed from a global point of view, in all aspects: educational, cultural, institutional, social, economic... concrete actions in the field of support to the businesswoman implemented till now do not improve their real possibilities, as much, put them in contact". (marketing, ES)*

## 8.2. Change in social norms

Many of our interviewees recognised that successful entrepreneurial programmes could be accomplished without a general transformation that, beside the institutions, would tackle also the values and social norms shaping our lives. Change should be implemented both top-down and bottom-up as one does not work without the other aiming to change the old norms and structures.

*"If men dared to be more emotional and women dared to be bold and dare, and "fuck it up", it would benefit everybody."* (women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Austria)

## 8.3. Change in familial, formal and informal education

Although in the previous chapter when focusing on difficulties shaping women's entrepreneurial career we only considered the (lack of impact) of higher education, given its very theoretical nature, here we also emphasise the role of formal and informal education in transmitting double standards towards boys and girls. Thus, this section is devoted to suggestions on how to change education in general so that would promote an entrepreneurial mindset, and second, deal with its gender biases.

First, as many interviewees argued, the old curricula should be replaced to promote entrepreneurial mindset. *"Women are used to play it safe, and they should be encouraged to be bold"*. Therefore, it is important not to be overprotective with girls and encouraging only the boys to take risks (women's entrepreneurial organisation representative, Austria). Changes in the mindset should start early, already in school (or even before, in kindergarten), to encourage creativity in both genders (large company, Portugal). To do so, teachers' education should be reformed, future teachers should be taught about group dynamics, self-awareness:

*"Girls should be better informed from the very beginning in education. I really had the vocation since I was a child when I saw my father with his company, but if in education you were given a course on how to be an entrepreneur and be able to start your own business, I think that the economy would grow more and in a better way".* (construction SME, ES)

On the university level it would be crucial to include entrepreneurial and practical skills, not only information in university curricula. But then again, things need to be begun much earlier (psychologist & expert, Austria).

*"The education sector is crucial in our lives, since what we are tomorrow will depend on our training. We must close barriers between men and women and try to live in a cordial world full of opportunities for all. When there is a woman who wants to be what she proposes, there should be no obstacles anywhere. Not for being a woman you should be relegated to the background. And that is achieved by instilling values from the childhood and from the school, institutes and universities".* (SME in IT, ES)

*"I think it is important, but we have to start at the base, for our daughters. They have to be aware that we are equal and that they should not set limits, that they must fight for what they want to do and that they are also capable. They must be brave and believe in themselves. What is done now I do not think it's wrong, I just think it's not enough. The problem starts from primary education".* (technology SME, ES)

## 8.4. Structural changes

The dominant view among our interviewees, especially among entrepreneurs, was that the individual had a great role in achieving certain goals or failing to do so. They needed to be perseverant, develop good work-life balance strategies and make good choices. However, we also encountered women and experts who acknowledged the role of society and its institution in encouraging or limiting women's attempts to be successful in the business life. That is why, in the following we summarise the most important suggestions they made with regard to structural – societal level – changes.

Society at large should increase women's access to better economic positions through an improved infrastructure and facilities for childcare (expert & decision maker, DE) and through the provision of assistance and services in caring tasks: *for people in charge of separated, single women or those without family support who can help to reconcile* (consulting in HR, ES). Also flexible forms of employment would benefit women, such as home office and the teleworking system (consulting in HR, ES).

## 8.5. Local and central state policies, NGO services

According to our study in Austria and in Spain (future) women entrepreneurs are offered grants (e.g. "Frauenbonus"). Along the same lines, interviewees from Romania would suggest the Romanian state to provide tax reductions to women entrepreneurs.

Women (and also male) entrepreneurs at their early stage in career are in great need of information regarding provisions, taxes, insurances. That is why local or regional networks of entrepreneurs would be highly valued, whether exclusively for women or not (Romania).

## 8.6. Recommendations for entrepreneurial programmes and trainings

Both female entrepreneurs and experts were requested to share their ideas and suggestions regarding policies and programmes to tackle the gender inequalities in entrepreneurship. The opinions expressed ranged from "no policies" to "prepare or encourage women exclusively". The views on adequate policies can be grouped in the following ways:

- 1) Providing women entrepreneurs **guidance with greater visibility through roadshows with diverse participants, TV shows with role models. A better representation of women** (even based on quotas) can make such careers more desirable for young women.
- 2) **Transforming university environment into a more entrepreneurship-friendly climate** to encourage students to start businesses. Additionally, to support sustainable initiatives, so that students will be able to run them themselves, providing constant change.

*"the university students are at the safe age of starting their business, as they do not have much to lose. Our task at higher educational institutions is to create the safe place for them and encourage them to do so."*



- 3) **Mentorship with the motto: “you can’t be what you can’t see”**. The following tools are considered as the most useful: personal connections to practicing entrepreneurs, supporting network of potential mentors:

*“Especially in the phase of founding a business, a good network is VERY helpful. Getting to know supporters/mentors and to activate them for these roles I regard as an important strategy. There are many possibilities of addressing interesting people. Be it blogging, be it other valuable offers... There are no limits to imagination.” (coach, Austria)*

- 4) **Internship programmes** in institutions with similar profile as the future business he or she would like to start. The goal should be to get as familiar as possible with all positions and tasks being carried out within the institution.
- 5) **Networking events** in order to establish informal and professional relations.

In the followings we summarise the most significant ideas. First we deal with gender neutral trainings, then with women-only trainings, with mixed and two-stage programs. In all cases arguments and suggestions for curricula will be presented. Before, however, the most important ideas for trainings in general are wrapped up.

### 8.6.1. Suggested approach and content for trainings in general

Experts recommend to make a distinction between “*teaching ABOUT entrepreneurship*” (defined as economic literacy) and “*teaching FOR entrepreneurship*”. The latter one

*“is all about skills and “throwing students into cold water”. They have to have an own idea, find out what questions they need to answer, where to look for answers and how to deal with the answers in order to evaluate whether an idea can be built into a business model and whether the business model is feasible enough etc.”. (Founders’ Center, Vienna)*

Both approaches are useful because they provide students with solid information on how to build a business & how to survive as a businesswoman/entrepreneur.

### 8.6.2. Gender neutral trainings

The issue of adequate and useful entrepreneurial programmes was extensively discussed in many interviews. People developed a wide range of thoughts and ideas concerning ideal programmes potentially encouraging women’s engagement in entrepreneurship. However, the cleavages were also deep: some argued that given the severe disadvantages women should be targeted through special programmes, others would recommend designing courses for both men and women.

When asked about what courses and trainings they would have had considered useful when being an early career woman entrepreneur, most respondents would have preferred gender neutral trainings. This idea is based on the conviction that men and women should be treated and educated equally.

*„Why should we be trained differently than men? I don’t see the point now. [...], We are not different from men, we may do something differently or approach things differently, but we have the same abilities, so we should be taught just like men, this way we will be well prepared. But this can be refuted, however, this is in my mind now” (CEO, light industry, Hungary)*



In their views, these programmes should be addressed to young entrepreneurs, offering them support, possibly preventing them from failures and suggesting a carrier path. The best solution is supposed to be to organise such programmes at universities. This would be especially important in countries where it is generally difficult to start a business (such as Hungary, as an interviewee said).

*"They would be very good, although there should be more information for small entrepreneurs and for those who want to know how to start their business". (construction SME, ES)*

*"The continued support for entrepreneurial projects, both in the business definition part and in the launching part, is fundamental for the projects to be turn into realities. Also the economic support. But I think it is not necessary to distinguish between men and women in these programs". (public administration, ES)*

As for their possible content, interviewees made the following recommendations:

- *encouraging the use of new technologies* (education provider, ES),
- *practical entrepreneurial, financial and marketing skills*. The practical module should include:
  - a) specific knowledge regarding the sector one plans to start a business is (care sector, IS);
  - b) marketing and business planning so that the participant can learn how to sell a product, e.g. which messages and which communication strategies are suitable for that particular market;
  - c) a strategy planning on product design, product positioning, consumer-based planning;
  - d) how to pay taxes;
  - e) language skills & how to penetrate to international markets;
  - f) financial course: bookkeeping, managing payroll, the essential legal requirements
  - g) how to access capital: VC investors, business angels (tech start-up, IS), *Offer information and advice on the possibility of opting for financing with advantageous conditions through a microcredit without endorsements, as well as accompanying those who request it". (education provision, ES)*
- *self-knowledge in order to build self-confidence and to acquire soft and management skills*: The psychological and self-knowledge module should include:
  - a) career coaching that could help participants mapping out their strengths and weaknesses,
  - b) psychology to improve the entrepreneur's understanding of his/her employees,
  - c) soft and management skills (communication technics, negotiation skills),
  - d) diplomatic skills, networking,
  - e) presentation, communication.
- *practical modules focusing on existing best practices and requiring practical assignments*. This module should include:
  - a) the best examples module: to show which actors are on the market,

- b) introduce entrepreneurs who can share their own experiences about the entrepreneurial world;
- c) practical assignments and projects, where they worked with real and current scenarios offered by the companies themselves.

Additionally, these programmes should create or grant access to structured, centrally regulated platforms for tender applications for entrepreneurs, providing access to information about these opportunities for the public (coach, self-employed, Hungary).

A sub-type of the gender neutral courses is that of offered within or by universities, as part of the higher education curriculum. Universities should be assigned a special role in strengthening the entrepreneurial mindset both among teachers and researchers on one side and students on the other. A closer collaboration of universities with industry and business sector, meaning more either applied science, joint projects or dual education, would strengthen entrepreneurial knowledge – or at least would contribute to an understanding of economy. This could create interest to get more deeply involved in business. Universities should also assist young scientists to address in their research needs of the business sector. Especially because *“female scientists look for career in science but only for 5 % of students are jobs in science available. Entrepreneurship would be a promising alternative.”* (expert & decision maker, DE)

An expert of the Viennese Founders' Centre recommended not to treat higher education students as a unitary, homogeneous group but being characterised by diverse interests and motivations. He recommended that universities should provide individualized support for future entrepreneurs. General services would not be helpful enough. A positive example could be found at the Technical University Munich with partner institution UnternehmerTum ([www.unternehmertum.de](http://www.unternehmertum.de) /) as it offered students, scientists and start-up entrepreneurs a unique infrastructure to successfully build up their business: comprehensive qualification from the initial seed of an idea to the growth phase). (landscape architect, DE)

Furthermore, universities should make infrastructure to support founders, e.g. existing facilities like laboratories, technology transfer offices, or new facilities like business incubator centers or start-up hubs available. Representatives of those can act as coaches or mentors (landscape architect, DE).

### 8.6.3. Designed especially or exclusively for women

Among our interviewees we identified adepts of programmes and courses targeting exclusively women. They consider that women have special needs, deal with specific social challenges, and none the less, it makes them more comfortable to ask questions without being ashamed. This feeling of *safety* would encourage them to address topics as work-life balance, emotional dilemmas and so on. One of our interviewees put it the following way:

*“It is important to provide women-only trainings, because women automatically start to behave as their assigned societal role requires it when men are involved in a group:*

*"trainings are much more efficient when only women are involved in them". (expert, Hungary)*

Such women-only programmes should cover the following topics:

- *practical economic and legal knowledge*: negotiating money & pricing & authenticity, regional touch;
  - a) financial know-how: how to apply for funding and pitch your ideas to investors and teaching strategies how to make a firm profitable.
 

*"Sometimes they [women entrepreneurs] are surprised that an entrepreneurship is about making money, therefore we talk a lot about money and ask them to think over how they are going to make money, when they will start making money and who will pay them, what will be the amount of money they will ask for their production or service." (representative of a women entrepreneur's association, Hungary)*
  - b) *special training in woman-related legal regulations*. This could include the rights of female employees regarding maternity leave;
  - c) *soft skills*: how women should *use their "emotionality" wisely* in the male world (of start-ups), what to wear, how to hold the hands and legs etc. Furthermore, they should be taught how to be brave, how to remain authentic, not trying to imitate someone else, how to handle situations in which male co-workers or negotiation partners attempt to display any form of male solidarity, how to be self-confident, how to communicate effectively, how to set goals and to be eager to learn new things, how to negotiate and manage a work group, time management, how to motivate employees, how to prevent burn-out.
- *awareness raising* of their (disadvantaged) situation to make them able to tackle difficulties
- *case study discussions* to show real examples.

Additionally, to the courses women entrepreneurs should be offered the following *services*:

- *networking events*: support actions for start-ups should include networking to find partners, investors, etc.; community building: self-help groups
- *teamwork, project work*.

The best trainings are those that are *personalised*:

*"They are totally necessary. I would propose to delimit the contents according to the level of company and professionalization. Adapt schedules and improve quality, as well as bring new concepts, methodologies and content". (services SME, ES)*

#### 8.6.4. Mixed groups on purpose

The adepts of mixed groups argue that is counterproductive to separate women from men in education because it also conveys the wrong message: in entrepreneurial life diverse teams (in terms of discipline, ethnicity, gender etc.) are one of the keys to success (Founders' Centre Vienna).

*"It is important to have people with a sparkle in their eye, who have an idea, want to go for it and who see these programmes as a great opportunity to take the next steps. They motivate the others" (Founders' Centre Vienna).*

Regarding to the role that the educational sector should have in supporting women entrepreneurs, he considers that *"training of women at the same level as men should be a priority, as well as any type of activity carried out at the institutional level aimed at empowering the woman, so that she gets enough security to go out into the business world with the same tools as a man and with the same security and conviction of not being second-class citizens, but possessing the same potential as a man and therefore capable of competing in that world"*. (educational provider, ES)

#### **8.6.5. Two stage programmes: first just for women, then mixed groups**

A particularly interesting suggestion was raised by expert. She thinks that there is a real need for women-only programmes because in these events women can talk more freely. They can learn how to speak up and then they can move out of the protective bubble. She highlights that this is a pre-stage and definitely not their final objective. Yet, given that women tend to have lower self-esteem and tend to criticise themselves more harshly, in these protective circles they can learn that their voice matters and might gain the courage to move on (Founders' Centre Vienna).

# Conclusions

## 9. Conclusions

This study was carried out in the seven partner countries of ifempower with the aim to provide the project team with empirical data and a sociological understanding regarding women entrepreneurs and their status, opportunities and social conditions. Thus, the present research report serves as a point of departure, a description of the state-of-the-art for the training programmes to be developed by our experts for university students. In this analysis our aim was double and that was to explore both facts and opinions. On the one hand, we attempted to reveal women entrepreneurs' characteristics and experiences and, on the other hand, to understand the way they perceived themselves and the social and economic environment they worked in. Their perceptions were the basis for their views and expectations regarding adequate training and support programmes.

Most women entrepreneurs included in the sample were highly educated which obviously could not be generalised in statistical terms. Many of those who did not graduate from a university with an economic profile had decided to enrol to post-gradual and other types of courses as an attempt to learn specific knowledge and skills used in the business life. On the other hand, women who had been grown up in families owning a family business, the choice for one degree or another was determined by her plans to join or not the family firm. Although women entrepreneurs included in the sample did not represent statistically the female entrepreneurial population, in most cases the firms owned by our interviewees were rather small and typically operated on the local markets.

Women's motivations to join the business life ranged from opportunity to necessity, the first including the wish to develop a hobby into business, exploit a market opportunity, while the last referred to the lack of flexibility of the labour market or the inability to perform both roles – as mother and as workers – adequately. Among the challenges encountered throughout their career, women entrepreneurs highlighted problems related to work-life balance, access to finance and the lack of role models. Of the forms of support, they mentioned women appreciated mentoring and personal or family assistance the most.

When asked to provide us with good examples of support programmes addressed to women entrepreneurs, interviewees emphasised programmes that generally targeted university students and women in particular, grant schemes, as well as mentorship. In a similar manner they offered their thoughts on necessary trainings, with that regard some argued for women-only, others for mixed groups or two-staged courses in order to create a friendly environment for women to discuss sensitive issues, but at the same time to prepare them for the hardships of the real business life.

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