



# VICTORUPESI

## Unity in diversity

Vocational Innovation using Creative new Technologies  
resulting in Upskilling Pathways for Social Integration

# National Report



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## 1. Desk Research

BES Cooperativa Sociale has used different resources and literature to explore the topic of the target group (women with on the autism spectrum and Asperger) and their social inclusion, including the needs of social media to aid inclusivity.

BES developed connections with relevant stakeholders which enabled two other methods of research to be conducted for this study.



### Introduction

#### **Framing**

Our research focuses on women diagnosed with high-functioning autism or Asperger's syndrome who show problems with relationships and social adaptation, without intellectual disability.

#### **The right words**

In the United States, Asperger's syndrome - named after Hans Asperger, the Austrian paediatrician who described it - officially entered psychiatric language around 1990, and in 1994 was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), while it disappeared from the DSM5, in which the different forms of autism are grouped together under the definition of autism spectrum disorders. Today, the definitions of Asperger's syndrome and or high-functioning autism (HFA) without cognitive deficits are used interchangeably.

For some years now we have been talking about neurodiversity: a way of saying that there are conditions, such as Asperger's or HFA, that are not diseases, even though they can create disability and discomfort. The term first appeared in 1998, in an article published by Harvey Blume in the New York Times. People with HFA and Asperger's very often have narrow and absorbing interests, a love of repetition and resistance to change, an ability to identify recurring patterns, attention to detail and unconventional solution making skills.

#### **Target group**

Autism spectrum disorders have always been considered male disorders, and even today there are very few studies on the subject that consider the gender variable. The result is that female autism often goes undetected. Until not too many years ago it was thought that in autism the ratio of males to females was close to 10:1 but studies have narrowed the field to 4:1. A 2017 review concludes that 3:1 is the more correct ratio, but the picture may change again in the coming years. Many professionals including Tony Attwood - author of the best-known handbook on Asperger's syndrome- believe that there is still a major gender bias that leads many girls, young women and girls to never receive a diagnosis that could (as testimonies confirm) change their lives.

A large 2012 study of 15,000 twins confirmed that the female spectrum more often goes unnoticed: it is much more difficult for a girl to be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder if no extra intellectual or behavioural problems are present. This reflects a gender bias in diagnosis: girls are subject to the pressures of a society that wants the female gender to be kind, sociable, ending up encouraging adapting to be 'normal'.

The wrong diagnosis regarding Asperger's syndrome in women might lead to a loss of self-esteem, anxiety and depression. Recognizing every aspect of this syndrome's spectrum for its specific matter it's a necessary step to face this problem.

Today, Aspies or Aspergirls - as they often call themselves - are beginning to emerge and are creating online communities such as the "Spazio Asperger" forum, or the Asperger Pride group, created in 2011 by E. Becerra. More and more Aspies are discussing the effective ways of interacting with neurotypicals. 2

### **Double discrimination**

For women on the autism spectrum, there is the issue of multiple discrimination in social life and in access to the world of work. They are not only discriminated against for being women, but also for being disabled. Being subject to multiple discrimination means being doubly marginalised. The consequences of combining the risk factor of gender and the risk factor of disability are such that the two are inseparable because a form of discrimination with its own characteristics is generated, since it is determined not by one factor but by two. This kind of multi-conditional discrimination leads autistic women to experience very serious marginalisation.

### **National legislation / policies / funding / initiatives supporting target group inclusion in the labour market**

#### **a. Related to vocational trainings**

#### **b. Related to companies**

The application of the national rules on mandatory job placement is extended to people with mental and intellectual disabilities with a working capacity that allows their employment in compatible tasks.

The evaluation of the person with disabilities must take into account the working and relational capacity and not only the physical or mental disability. The ability to work is ascertained by the responsible committees which includes a specialist in the neurological, psychiatric or psychological disciplines.

The ascertainment of the conditions of disability (art. 1 - paragraph 4 of law 68/99), relating to residual capacities, allows access to the system for job placement and to targeted placement paths.

The Italian regulatory framework is defined above all by Law No. 104 of 1992 (Framework Law for assistance, social integration and the rights of disabled people), by Law n.68 of 1999, by D.Leg. 276/2003 (inclusion of disabled people in social cooperatives and the instrument of the Conventions ex art. 14), and finally by the Law. 247/2007 and the Legislative Decree No. 151/2015 which offer additional tools for the effective integration of the disabled worker.

Law 68/99 regulates the labour integration of people with different abilities (sensorial, physical, mental). Companies with more than 15 employees and less than 35 must hire 1 disabled worker (2 if the company has between 35 and 50 employees), registered in the lists of the Protected Categories, at the Labour offices managed by the Metropolitan Cities and the Provinces. Companies with more than 50 employees must employ a number of disabled people equal to 7% of workers. Since January 2018, the penalties for companies that do not comply with this obligation have been tightened.

The cornerstones of the laws in force to support the employment of disabled people are:

- Lists and rankings of disabled unemployed people (Protected Categories).

- Forecast of the reserve quota, that is the obligation to hire disabled people beyond a certain number of employees, in charge of the companies.
- The instrument of agreements between companies and competent territorial offices.
- Involvement of institutional subjects (Ministry of Labour, Technical Committee for drafting the disabled card, INAIL, ANPAL).
- System of economic incentives for hiring.
- Checks by the National Labour Inspectorate on compliance with employment obligations and exemptions.
- Sanctions for companies that do not comply with the obligation to employ disabled people.

Law 68/99 has foreseen the tool of "targeted placement" to hire the person with disabilities in the most suitable workplace, through personalized paths of inclusion in the work context. The employment of a disabled worker requires different timing and methods depending on the personal situation and the context where he/she will be included. The targeted placement is implemented with flexible tools that meet both the needs of businesses and those of people with disabilities. For those cases where the access to the labour market is more difficult, a work integration agreement can be stipulated. These tools are even more important for the job placement of people with mental disabilities who need support to work through vocational training activities, internships, guided work experiences.

School, training and social and health services, together with the action of families, have promoted preparatory initiatives for work integration, allowing in particular the mentally disabled to enter the labor market.

It is desirable in the future to have a greater and more widespread access to the opportunities offered by law n. 68/99, that defines targeted placement as a series of technical and support tools that allow people with disabilities to be adequately assessed in their working skills and to place them in the right place, through:

- job analysis,
- forms of support, positive actions,
- solutions to problems connected with environments, tools and interpersonal relationships.

In essence, the assumption is that there can be no exclusion from the labour market in general because, not always, a particular type or degree of disability corresponds to a decrease or absence of working capacity. Therefore, PWDs / PMDs, who aspire to a job suited to their abilities and meet the required requirements, must register on the appropriate lists held at the local Public Employment Center. There, the following features are noted in a special fiche:

- working skills,
- abilities, competences, and inclinations,
- the nature and degree of disability,
- the characteristics of the places to be assigned, favouring the meeting between job demand and supply.

With the D. Leg. 151/2015, rules are introduced for the rationalization and simplification regarding the integration of people with disabilities: the Targeted Placement Database is established, and the incentive system is modified. In addition, Guidelines are introduced, consisting of several Decrees of the Minister of labor and social policies to coordinate the services of Targeted Placement.

Here we recall L.134/2015 Provisions on diagnosis, care and rehabilitation of persons with autism spectrum disorders and assistance to families. The purpose of the law (art. 1), in accordance with the provisions of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution No. A/RES/67/82 of 12 December 2012 on the needs of persons with autism, is to promote interventions aimed at ensuring

the protection of health, improvement of living conditions and inclusion in social life of persons with autism spectrum disorders. The regulation provides that the National Institute of Health shall update the Guidelines on the treatment of autism spectrum disorders at all ages on the basis of the evolution of scientific knowledge and national and international good practices (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2015).

Training courses funded by the Region / Province provided by employment agencies and training institutions for PWD / PMD are provided to increase job opportunities. Currently, it is available the activation of training internships through territorial bodies (for example CELAV - Municipality of Milan) that facilitate the work placement. Through public local funds, some social cooperatives and associations promote SFA (Autonomy Training Services) courses. To date, no homogeneous data are available with respect to internships and activated courses and internships.

### **Statistics regarding:**

#### **a. the profile of the target groups in the participating countries (major nationalities, age, unemployment, level of education, knowledge of languages)**

The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) network in the United States has published a new report on the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in children. This report shows that 1 in 59 children is on the spectrum, compared to the estimate of 1 in 68 that existed until now.

The ratio of 4 children per girl is maintained, which is very much in line with previous or available studies in other countries.

Another report published in 2018 in Canada indicates a prevalence of 1 in 66 children with ASD in that country. And, again, there is a 4 to 1 gender ratio, with a prevalence of 1 in 42 boys and 1 in 165 girls. If we narrow the focus to HFA/Asperger's, according to British psychologist Attwood, a more realistic ratio might be 2.5 to 1.

In Italy, data on the situation of people with disabilities are fragmented and difficult to find. Each Italian Region (the body in charge of the Employment Policies of the disabled, which in turn are delegated to the Provinces), processes data and statistics with different times and methods.

Italian data on the incidence on the population of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are very close to international data. There are no statistics on the employment of girls and women diagnosed with HFA but we know that they have many difficulties in accessing employment and especially in maintaining employment. For instance, BES cooperative received 8 CVs from Asperger's women in 2020 compared to 20 CVs from men. Most of them, between 24 and 40 years old, are highly educated (university degree, 1 with a doctorate).

The relationship between disability and employment still remains a critical dimension in our country. This was also recently confirmed by Istat (November 2019) recalling how out of 100 people between the age of 15-64 who, despite limitations in motor or sensory functions or behavioural/ intellectual disorders, are still able to work, only 35.8% are employed (compared to 57.8% of people without limitations), 20.7% are looking for employment while 43.5% are inactive (among people without limitations the percentage is 27.5%) (Fondazione Studi Consulenti del Lavoro, Dossier 2020, p.3).

The employment situation of people with mental disabilities is certainly critical. There are still few PMDs that find stable employment, despite a very advanced regulatory framework and a protective incentive system. In companies, the prejudice that disabled people are unproductive generally persists. There is still one more stigma towards psychic disability which refers to

environmental / cultural barriers. Even architectural barriers are an obstacle to the employment of people with reduced mobility and sensory disabilities.

Most disabled people are employed in low-skilled positions despite some having good potential and good schooling. The main employment sectors in both public and private companies are catering, cleaning, garden maintenance, back office (data entry), call centre.

#### **b. the use of vocational training**

To date, there are no known vocational training paths exclusively dedicated to women with Asperger's or AHF diagnosis. There are in general many training opportunities for PWD, often dedicated to those with intellectual deficits and therefore inadequate for the target group. Women Asperger's or HFA girls access normal school and university paths, reaching the highest levels of education, sometimes even PhD.

Attention to this issue is beginning to grow in society, given the increased awareness of autism and multiple discrimination against women with disabilities.

#### **Main challenges for target group (cultural constraints; lack of information; legal restraints, lack of access)**

We believe that our work on this topic is necessary because of the lack of experience and information on this issue. More and more HFA/Asperger women, after their often late diagnosis, turn to social cooperatives, Job Centres and Employment Agencies asking for support in finding work opportunities and in maintaining employment.

One aspect that must unfortunately be pointed out is the persistent stigma attached to autism and neurodiversity, even when it is not accompanied by an intellectual deficit.

Much needs to be done in the cultural sphere to reduce the barriers that exist to the full social and employment inclusion of people with this condition.

## 2. Focus Groups



The second part of this research consisted of two different focus groups. The aim of these discussions was to understand the training needs of the target group. The same set of questions, adapted to each organization realities, were asked by all partners to allow the partnership to compare results and prepare materials to suit the needs of all countries involved.

In total 6 women with autism and 13 experts/stakeholders took part in these separate discussions and it should be noted that some of these target groups also took part in the in-depth interviews which are detailed below.

The 2 Focus Groups were held through a video call on the 15th of February (Target Group) and one on the 18th of February (Experts and relevant stakeholders).

### **A) RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUP WITH TARGET GROUP – WOMEN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM AND ASPERGER SYNDROME**

The first Focus Group saw the participation of 6 women affected by either mild or high functioning autism, plus two staff members of BES, namely Paola Baldini (President) and Antonio Dell'Atti (Project Manager and facilitator). Even in such a specific target, it has been possible to appreciate the differences among the participants in terms of personal experience and characteristics.

With respect to research questions, used within the interviews, the focus group had a discussion, reflecting the below mentioned objectives:

- Policies on Trainings at the regional and national Levels
- Their personal experience, desires and aspiration in regard to Training Courses in terms of skills development and usefulness
- Channels and tools to find employment opportunities
- Challenges, obstacles and stereotypes faced in the access to the labour market

After a brief introduction by each participant, discussions began on the knowledge and value of the existing policies on training at the national and local level.

All participants agreed that, despite the good regulatory framework, there is a strong need for incentives for companies to facilitate the access of people with disabilities in the labour market. The main obstacles are of economic nature: participants feel that more funds should be invested to encourage companies to hire them. In relation to their personal experience, 4 of them answered that they have been part of training courses or internships and that it was generally a positive experience in terms of skills acquisition, specifically in administration, data entry, marketing and sales. It has been discussed, though, that the structure could have been adapted in terms of time and length to better answer the participants' needs.

This connected to the topic of the still existing stigma against people with disabilities and their real abilities to work, which negatively affect their chances to be employed. Participants then debated the problem of prejudices and discrimination. The majority of the participants recognized that some of the characteristics of autism can reflect in traits and behaviours that can require additional investments and that might therefore dissuade employers. Interestingly, they also highlighted how the

gender issue can play an additional role in the discrimination, further discouraging companies. Participants generally shared the fear of being mis-judged and not understood, especially in the interview/selection process, due to lack of knowledge on their condition. This translates often in the uncertainty about revealing their condition from the start. Not stating it could in fact, on one hand, increase the chances to be employed, but on the other have a detrimental effect, preventing their rights and needs to be met.

When investigating their desires and aspirations on the topic of skills development and training opportunities, answers varied, also as a reflection of their differences in the autistic spectrum. The general agreement was on the need to increase their abilities and knowledge to be employed in an “office setting”, mainly referring to IT skills, data analysis and admin/accounting. One participant stated her preference for screenplay writing, in a videogame company.

On the questions about channels and tools used to look for job opportunities, most of the participants relied on the internet (i.e LinkedIn, online vacancies), finding it also easier to understand when job offers are targeting specifically legally protected categories. One participant referred to the work of Auticon and Specialisterne, companies that are focusing their action mainly on people with high functioning autism, in IT.

## **B) RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUP WITH PROFESSIONALS, EXPERTS AND RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS**

The second Focus Group saw the participation of 4 members staff of BES and 12 people, representing different points of view and interest. In particular, the following categories attended the event: companies, associations and cooperatives specifically targeting PMD, public authorities (in charge of welfare and social care), lawyers, psychologists and doctors, researchers.

With respect to research questions, used within the interviews, the focus group had a discussion, reflecting the below mentioned objectives:

- Policies and legislation
- Fundings opportunity/suggestions and how to properly address them
- Specific job sector, if existing, that could be more appropriate for the target group
- Obstacles to inclusion in the labor market and possible solutions to the identified challenges

After a brief introduction, discussions began on the current policies and legal framework, specifically on its ability to answer to the training needs of the target group (women with autism and Asperger syndrome). First of all, it has been noted that currently, in Italy, but possibly at the international level, too, there is no specific law focusing on women on the spectrum. It was a shared opinion among participants, though, that it might not be needed. Questions, in fact, raised on the opportunity to have specific laws for the target group. On one hand, it was highlighted how today regulations and, more broadly, the societal view of autism, completely miss the gender perspective. Women with autism suffer from multiple discrimination, an issue that can be solved only through the lenses of intersectionality. On the other hand, it was highlighted how Italy has already a good regulatory framework, both from the point of view of work inclusion and education. Hyper-legislation could risk complicating even further the implementation of the existing policies, in an environment where lack of clarity seems to already prevail. Given a good enough framework, real issues rise in the translation into reality and to the proper application. Words such as “inhomogeneity”, “fragmentation” and “discontinuity” punctuated the entire discussion, highlighting the needs for a clear direction and a better communication within all “fields of life”.

From the legal aspects, the discussion naturally progressed to the analysis of the challenges of the current structure in place: the main issue that was pointed out, in fact, has been the extreme difficulty to systemize such laws and to integrate the different stakeholders involved (education sector,



health sector, job sector, social sector etc.). All participants agreed on the lack of clear existing procedures, and that such a confusion and lack of direction translate negatively both in practical terms, hindering the concrete support to the beneficiaries, but also in terms of funding, that could be spent more efficiently.

Another shared opinion was the lack of knowledge and education on the topic of autism, at all levels, not only in the general public. It appears that services and operators themselves are not properly trained and equipped with tools to support the beneficiaries in the process of social integration and access to the job market. The general opinion is that the starting point for a shift in perspective on the topic of autism and a revolution of the system, would be therefore a better preparation of the operators, who should, in turn be able to assess better the women's needs and to present this target group with more options and choices. The social stigma also affects companies themselves, who prefer to pay penalties or being involved as "sponsors" in a project rather than hire people on the spectrum directly. It has been interestingly noted how managing a physical disability, from the point of view of a company, might be easier and even economically advantageous, rather than dealing with an "invisible" disability, which definitely poses more challenges in terms of problem solving and re-organization of the working environment.

Related to this issue, was also the discussion on people's skills, and on the need of a better assessment. This is because every person with autism is different, with specific needs and characteristics. Too broad of a generalization on the abilities of people on the spectrum could drive to a shortage of professional options presented to them.

The last part of the discussion was an attempt to find specific categories of employment that were best suitable for women on the autistic spectrum: many participants stated that there is not just a single job or working task that is more appropriate for the target group we are analysing. Women with autism can and should be hired in a variety of jobs: from education, to science, passing through the IT sector, journalism and the arts, depending on their abilities, but most of all, on their own desires and aspirations. The focus on the concept of "person" with her ability to clearly take decisions and guide her own life path, was another fil rouge found in the discussion from the beginning to the end. The lack of knowledge on the topic, with the inability to properly evaluate and assess the opportunities for the individual in consideration, means that too often women on the spectrum find themselves undervalued and de-professionalized, in a perpetual cycle of demotivation and absence of gratification.

Indeed, some participants pointed out that the skills assessment and the focus on personal aspirations is easier for women with either severe autism or who, on the contrary, are on the opposite side of the spectrum and high functioning. For the people "in between" such collocation can be harder. This is even more true for those men and women who are diagnosed later in life, whose problem is not the first access to the job market, but rather their relocation and the ability to maintain a position: this category is growing exponentially in the last years and it is at a very high risk of not being considered.

The Focus Group proved useful also to start developing possible solutions to overcome some of the obstacles that were described. Many participants stressed the importance of a systemisation of the rules and different approaches and of a better communication among all the stakeholders, starting from the initial diagnosis, throughout the entire life path. Schools, universities, companies, social operators and health workers must in fact work together and speak the same language. This starts from one side, from drawing a clear line of communication of the regulatory framework and on the other side, from the proper training of all the operators involved. The presence of a tutor or an expert could encourage the inclusion and break down fears related to a lack of knowledge. Many participants, in this regard, highlighted how the figure of the Disability Manager, could be an answer and an important tool, which could also be taken into consideration for additional funding.

On the topic of funding, the shared opinion was the need to invest in the training and preparation of the operators and to create direct incentives for the companies to hire. It is important that companies and the general work market understand that hiring a neuro-diverse person (of any gender) creates a virtuous cycle. Companies need to have the incentive to invest initially in training, tools and equipment to welcome the person appropriately in the work environment. In this sense, though, there must be a shift from viewing the individual as a mere “quota”, to really see him/her as a resource that in the long-term will bring benefits to the company, even in economic terms. Another idea that has been contemplated during the discussion was that of creating “teams” of workers on the spectrum. This is because it might not be as efficient for a company to invest only on one individual, who, unlike a person with physical disability, will probably need constant support for the rest of his/her working experience. Investing on a group of persons could be an answer to this issue.

Another interesting suggestion has been to create a personal digital “dossier” for every individual, containing all relevant information and personal history that could be easily accessible by professionals and operators during the entire working life of a person, avoiding the loss of details and subsequent repetition.

It has pointed out that special attention should be paid to the quality and variety of the training courses that are offered. When thinking about a training program, it must be recognized that people with autism or Asperger have their own specificities that should be appreciated and recognized. Most of all, all people with autism differ from one another and can be interested in different things. The inability to understand this, together with the fragmentation of the system in which different stakeholders do not work in sync with one another, means that often the available training courses lack in value, utility and are too repetitive. If so, such vocational training very often does not lead to real hiring opportunities and placement but is an end in themselves. Having the dossier that we have mentioned could be a tool to have a record of the individual’s past experiences and to present them with a better tailored option.

### **3. In-depth Interviews**

The recruitment process for these in-depth interviews included different stages of work (informing about the project, acquainting with the projects objectives and main aims, invitation to participate).

In the first interviews, we talked individually to six different women on the autism spectrum. The second group of interviews were carried out with stakeholders: a diverse range association, institutions, professionals and companies were interviewed. This allowed the partnership to collect detailed data.

#### **A) RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH TARGET GROUP – WOMEN WITH AUTISM AND ASPERGER SYNDROME**

Interviews took place in different days (from the 29th of January until the 8th of February 2021), through one-to-one video calls between a member staff of BES and a participant. Interviews involved a total of 6 participants of the Target Group, namely women with a diagnosis of Asperger and mild-high functioning autism.

#### **Legislation and policies**

The first questions aimed at investigating the knowledge about the current legislation and policies fostering work integration and vocational training of the target group, by the participants themselves.

This showed the first issue, that is that some of the participants did not have a clear understanding of the existing legal framework and/or of the policies to support their social integration and access in the work market. This lack of awareness might be a first obstacle to overcome in order for them to be successful in realizing their personal aspirations and autonomy.

It was agreed that even though the theoretical legal framework is not necessarily weak, there is still a large space for improvement.

## **Challenges**

The challenges that have been highlighted are the following:

- the need for an easier access to training and job market, specifically a stronger relationship between “supply and demand” and the establishment of specific accompanying measures.
- the need for a change in perspective and in general, for more awareness on the topic. Common knowledge tends to stereotype people on the autism spectrum, enlisting them in one category. Truth is that every individual is different, with specific needs, but also a different diagnosis.

There is the need for different paths and possibly of legislation for people who need more support on one side, and for people who are more autonomous on the other. Social stigma and lack of knowledge mean that too often the individual’s real abilities are not recognized and that the person cannot have his/her aspirations and needs met. All participants agreed that the most important challenge is to overcome the social stigma and the prejudice against people with autism. Many people with autism do not even have a chance to prove their skills because they are not taken into consideration. Another issue that they highlighted is that their diagnosis translates in needs and behaviors that need adaptation in the work placement (e.g. avoiding contact with the public; difficulties in “reading” emotions; need to have clear procedural tasks; sensorial difficulties; challenges in focusing, etc.) and this is an obstacle because companies are not ready to make such changes or to accommodate them. Participants also noted that the gender issue is an additional challenge and that a young woman is in general more discriminated against. Both these issues were later found also in the interviews with experts and stakeholders.

## **The impact of Covid19**

The third question focused on the effects of the Covid19 pandemic on their effort to enter vocational training and job opportunities. In general participants agreed that Covid19 negatively affected their situation: it meant losing jobs that could not be carried out online but required the physical presence of the employee; it has also been harder to get in contact with companies. On the other side, one participant took part in an online training course and another one highlighted that the Covid19 pandemic brought changes that affected positively her work and daily life, because not having contact with co-workers was, at least for her, a “supporting factor”. Most of the participants reported that they lost a salary, but could count on social benefits and pensions, even though not particularly high.

## **Funding and training initiatives**

The next question focused on the topic of funding for training resources and access to the labor market. Most participants did not have a deep understanding of the topic and of the existing resources, but the general idea was that they are not satisfactory. On the other side, all of them have taken part in the past to at least one training experience as beneficiaries on different topics. It is not always clear, though, if such training opportunities:

- answered to the needs and personal aspirations/interests of the participant
- properly equipped the participant with practical tools for the job market

Fear is that such training courses risk to be self-serving and lack a real connection with companies afterwards. Participants should not be stuck in a perpetual “training cycle” but need a real hiring opportunity.

Some of the participants are aware of the lack of centralization and common guide at the national level and described the opportunities as “isolated”. Most participants evaluated the existing initiatives as either inadequate or insufficient, possibly since the awareness on the topic, and specifically on the target group of women, is still very low. Participants are victims of social stigma which hinder their possibility to be hired, since companies do not know enough and tend to mis-judge their abilities.

When investigating possible training sectors that might be appropriate for the target group, there was no specific answer. Women with Asperger syndrome can and should be trained in different sectors. Participants agreed that today is important to gain skills in the digital/IT fields, and that this is an area where more training opportunities already exist. Though, it was also noted that not every person with Asperger is interested or skilled in IT. Participants named for instance: languages, performing arts, financial and accounting, politics.

### **Possible Solutions**

The main solution that was proposed is the spread of knowledge on the topic of autism, and training tools targeting specifically the social workers and operators who are in charge of supporting the beneficiaries in entering the job market. Truth is that such operators too often do not have the necessary tools and information to properly guide the beneficiaries and this leads to a “mismatching” in the job placement. Training should also be offered in families, schools and companies. In this last case, information should be given not only to employers, but also to co-workers, because this is the key to a successful and open working environment and the ability to maintain the job. Lastly, beneficiaries themselves need to be more aware of their skills and to gain the self-confidence to look for opportunities and to apply for jobs, in order to be really fulfilled and gratified.

## **B) RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSIONALS; EXPERTS AND RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS**

Interviews took place in different days (from the 8th to the 12th of February 2021), through one-to-one video calls between a member staff of BES and an expert/stakeholder. Interviews involved a total of 6 experts, coming from a wide variety of sectors (associations, foundations and cooperatives working with target groups; lawyers; health professionals; institutions).

### **Legislation, Policies and Challenges**

About the legal framework and existing policies, the general opinion of the participants is that in Italy there are some good laws, but that work must be done, still, to implement them correctly. Employment policies favour people with other types of disabilities, but are not always effective for the integration of people in need of protected workplaces and continuous support, like our target group. There are laws that “oblige” companies to hire people with disabilities, but and there are not the conditions for them to be actually respected, since the existing control system is not efficient and sanctions, although high, are not frequently applied. Also, thinking that people must be hired “by law” can be considered a defeat, especially when talking about people that have relevant skills and that are in fact able to work well.

Most importantly, everyone agrees that there is the need for a bridge between the theoretical framework and the practice. For example, the law on autism of 2015 has increased the available

funding, and consequently the opportunities to offer, but in reality, this is still far from true and concrete actions are still lacking. This discrepancy is generally seen as due:

- to the lack of preparation by professionals and operators who are not able to apply them, and
- the lack of coordination between stakeholders, which has led to a system that is highly fragmented.

There is, therefore, a need for a clear model to be applied and adapted to the single cases, where the abilities and knowledge of stakeholders can be fully integrated in a fluid manner.

Women in particular are even more penalized as it is a target group that “passes under the radar”, which needs specific attention, but it is still not taken enough into consideration. There is no legislation targeting women with autism specifically. There is no consensus among participants if there is a need for specific laws, but everyone agrees that women on the spectrum have specific needs that must be taken into account more.

### **Initiatives**

Until now, there have not been projects targeting specifically women on the autistic spectrum in Italy and the gender perspective has not been taken into consideration. Projects are still dominated by a “male” view and focus often on areas of work where women are not necessarily interested in. Also, there is a variety of initiatives funded by different lines and institutions but they are not centralized and this creates confusion and inefficiency. It seems that initiatives are left to the awareness and goodwill of the third sector, while in reality there must be coordination from the top. Again, it was noted that there is no connection between projects and companies and this represents an important limitation, because beneficiaries have spent time acquiring skills that they cannot put in practice and that in the long-term might get lost or forgotten. This has a negative impact on the self-confidence and motivation of the beneficiaries, because it makes it harder for them to understand the reason behind participating in these types of training opportunities with no real outcomes. There is a need for a common responsibility.

The greatest issue seems to be the creation of a bridge between “demand and supply”. The general agreement is that in Italy, just a minority of people on the autism spectrum are actually employed, and among them, the majority have a diagnosis of high-functioning autism. This means that the larger number of people with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome are under-employed or badly employed. Therefore, even individuals with higher education find it difficult to be employed correctly, respecting their abilities and desires. This is clearly disempowering and a source of demotivation, anxiety and even depression. It must be understood that there is an important relationship between stress and health. Employment is, in fact, a health issue, too and not finding realization in it can have a negative impact on one’s own quality of life.

### **The impact of Covid19**

The emergency of Covid19 has exacerbated the gap between neuro-typical workers and people with autism, as they are considered less performing even though this could have been an opportunity to engage better with such target group, since many activities can be efficiently carried out through remote working and this could be for some, a positive aspect.

### **Possible sectors and training areas**

When investigating the possible training sectors for women with Asperger, again, there was no one specific area that has been suggested. Women on the autism spectrum can be trained and employed within a variety of fields, given the right assessment of their skills and personal characteristics. New sectors to investigate could be the educational and psychology ones. It could be

interesting to create a synergy between people on the spectrum and neuro-typical professionals, who can work hand in hand, gaining new perspectives and approaches by working in cooperation. Another sector that was proposed was the design/architectural one, noting that many women on the spectrum have education experience in the arts.

It must always be noted that even within the group of high-functioning people, there are differences that must be considered.

### **Funding and solutions**

According to the participants, funding and solutions should mainly be oriented towards:

- a serious training and preparation of professionals/operators: beneficiaries cannot be trained adequately if trainers and operators themselves lack the right information. Adding the gender issue is a must (for instance: motherhood in autism is a topic that should be investigated more; women tend to “hide” their difficulties better and therefore they are diagnosed way later in life, etc.);

- raising awareness and creating more opportunities for training and preparation within companies, not only in the high hierarchies, but also among co-workers;

- creating incentives to hire within the job market;

- networking and digitalisation within a national framework, in order to help relevant stakeholders and institutions to communicate better and efficiently;

- a better analysis and assessment of each individual’s profile and preferences.

## **FINDINGS**

The main findings from this research are as follows:

- The training should take into consideration:  
A variety of topics which could lead the participants to improve/acquire transversal skills, useful for both social/personal and professional growth and integration. These can include:

- Computer Literacy and ICT
- self-empowerment and self-esteem
- self-analysis and understanding of one’s abilities and aspirations
- tools to navigate the Job market
- communication and social skills
- team working and conflict management
- job rights and at least a basic knowledge of the legal system in Italy.

Tutors and mentors might be needed during the training in some cases.

- Partners should provide participants with **clear instructions** on:
  - purpose of the training and aims of the VICTORUPESI project in general
  - benefits and opportunities derived by taking part in the Training modules, both personally and professionally
  - clear details on the training calendar, location and delivery methodology
  - Training content
  - expectations we have in regard to their participation/presence throughout the whole training
  - existing support figures during the training in case of need

- **Flexible training is essential** - our target group is complex and could have a variety of needs. Being on the autistic spectrum means that every individual might show common traits, but we should not forget that they could express it in different ways. Flexibility within future training important, both in content but also in methodology.

- From the focus groups and interviews, it can be noted that the participants are keen on:
  - strengthening their IT/Digital skills;
  - be employed in many different working areas, including IT, administration, creative field, finance, politics;
  - understanding better how to look for appropriate employment opportunities and which tools to use.

Participants showcased an interests in a large spectrum of fields, related to their own personality traits, skills, specific abilities and interests. This is important to note, as too often people on the autistic spectrum are categorized together as all presenting the same traits. This is definitely not the case. If it's true that Autism can be recognized through a set of common behaviors, it's also true that it is, in fact, a spectrum, composed by individuals who are very different from one another. A really effective training process, but more in general an individual "life-path" project, must take this into consideration, starting from the core of the issue, which is always a well defined person.

- It must be noted that during the interviews and focus groups, participants highlighted the huge issue of social stigma against people with autism which further enhance their difficulties in being employed. This lead to a general sense of de-evaluation and lack of self-esteem. The issue of stigmatization and prejudice was central to every interview and focus group we had, therefore for an approach and a project to be truly effective, it must be taken into consideration. Beneficiaries can and want to grow, learn, acquire skills etc. but their efforts and desires cannot truly have a real impact on their quality of life, if the society and their communities are not informed about their functioning and therefore truly ready to welcome and to adjust to them. Our research highlighted how even social operators and companies are not trained to really guide the beneficiaries, bridging the gap between demand and supply in a way that satisfies every part involved.
- Another issue we have found is that our target group does not generally have a deep understanding of the legal framework concerning their employment in our country. The Italian Legal framework can be definitely improved under different aspects, but it is still considered one of the best in Europe. Given this, beneficiaries, from our experience and study, are generally not deeply informed on the existing system, on their rights and tools to access in case of need. Therefore, it could be interesting and useful to approach this topic as well, even though not clearly stated by the participants either.
- Partners should be aware that **training needs are different for each participant** and training should be planned accordingly.

## How are we going to use these findings?

When developing the training materials, the partners will ensure that the content is **clear and easy to understand**, consisted of all the relevant information needed to use **different social media platforms**, and also included information on **safety and security** when using the platforms. With regards to language barriers, all partners **translated the materials into English, Swedish, Italian, Serbian, Slovenian, Romanian and Spanish** to aid the training in the different countries.

When training starts, each partner organization should consider ensuring **that flexible training options are given** to suit those involved, and the **online learning platform** will also be used to supplement the training, in case any information needed reiterating.

### Other ways of using the findings.

#### The importance of diversity management!

VICTORUPESI consortium consist out of very divers partners serving very diverse beneficiaries. This represents a micro mirror of the societies each of our beneficiaries are living in and is really important to build the ground for holistic approaches.

Reasons for having holistic approaches in your country:

- Autistic spectrum and Asperger diagnosis is reflected differently in every individual and affect every person in a different way. Also, it can have serious consequences in all aspects of life. It is important so, to find an individually tailored approach respecting specific barriers/needs of the person to be included in the training.
- As autism is an “holistic” issue in itself, it must be tackled taking into consideration different views and through the coordination of a variety of entities/institutions and stakeholders: health, social, educational, family, work. Stakeholders need a better coordination/communication and easier access to centralized information.
- Specific needs and barriers faced by women on the spectrum. The gender variable has not been taken enough (or at all) into consideration until today, but it is crucial to tailor training and to solve the issue of double discrimination analysed above. Approach to Autism cannot be considered truly effective and complete if not taking into consideration the gender perspective.
- It has been highlighter how important is to have a “Person centered” approach, which must take into consideration the real aspirations and desire of every individual and avoid broader generalization of the target group.

#### The importance of digital skills!

The world is changing significantly, hence the need to keep up to date with technology. With technology advancing at an incredible speed, it is important that we are not lagging behind these changes.



## **The overviews of the political context in each of the partners countries**

In Italy, attention to the issue of inclusion of women diagnosed with Autism Spectrum is very recent. By law, the protections, economic resources, and active policy tools for labour insertion provided by Law 68/99, Legislative Decree 276/2003 and subsequent regulations are addressed to them.

In Parliament, the Hon. Lisa Noja is carrying on significant battles for a greater protection of women with different abilities at work and in society. Amendments are being discussed in the Chamber of Deputies, in agreement with the Ministry of Equal Opportunities (Minister Prof. Elena Bonetti) on the necessary further protection of women and fragile workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since 2021 the Ministry for Disability has come back, and it is now covered by the Hon. Erika Stefani. It should be noted that this choice has been quite controversial and that not all professionals and experts in the field are approving of the choice, stating that it represents not a step forward towards a better inclusion of PWD in society, but a step back, in the direction of more discrimination: this is because doing seems to indicate disability as a “special” topic and not an “holistic” one, that is transversal to every field of society and that therefore should be taken into consideration in every policy, too.

Several universities and research centres are developing research on the topic of Autism and Women. On 9/12/2020 the webinar "Autism and Work: comparing experiences and intervention models" promoted by the Municipality of Milan was held. Third sector organisations, experts, companies, doctors and psychologists discussed the topic, bringing the most recent experiences of work inclusion of people on the autism spectrum, within the framework of the "Autism in the network" project.

Institutional, governmental and territorial bodies have recently been devoting attention to the women diagnosed with HFA and Asperger's spectrum. The occasions for raising awareness on this issue are mainly linked to the celebrations of World Autism Awareness Day on 2nd of April and World Asperger's Syndrome Day on the 18th of February.

## **The overviews of the funding of vocational education in each of the partners countries**

Training courses funded by the Region / Province provided by employment agencies and training institutions for PWD / PMD are provided to increase job opportunities. Currently, in Italy, it is available the activation of training internships through territorial bodies (for example CELAV - Municipality of Milan) that facilitate the work placement. Through public local funds, some social cooperatives and associations promote SFA (Autonomy Training Services) courses. To date, no homogeneous data are available with respect to internships and activated courses and internships.

## **The overviews of the local companies and industries available to hire our beneficiaries in each of the partners countries**

### **Best practices supporting people with autism in Italy**

The employment of people with autism is a pioneering process that requires a lot of effort and new thinking. In Italy, in the last years, organisations are starting to work towards the belief that “young people with autism have, at various levels, extraordinary abilities and talents that we have to 'enable' against a society that today 'disables' them and places them in a condition of 'restriction' within the family or in often dehumanising institutions” (Bollini et al. 2013, p.4). The following best

practices example attempt to show how a fruitful model of employment is possible. Italian experiences of work placement for people with autism are almost all in the area of protected insertion in workplaces, organised either in communities, or in social enterprises (cooperatives), especially in social farming environments.

One of the first realities of work is represented by the activities carried out in Cascina Rossago, a health care residence for disabled people in Pavia, accredited by the Lombardy Region. It is designed following the example of community farms.

The second good practice is given by Centro Servizi Ascotsrl in Florence. The company has developed a specific assistance in the social-relational field aimed at the social and work reintegration of people with Autism, through a pathway of reactivation of their cognitive and relational functions. For instance, their ALI project (Autonomy, Labour, Integration) follows a training and work placement model, in catering and tourist reception activities, animal breeding and gardening.

In relation to hospitality, the project PizzAut-nutriamol'inclusione was created to guarantee a future of work and dignity for children in the spectrum. It implies a training programme and the insertion of young people with autism in pizza shop and food trucks.

Another example is the European Therapeutic Centre (ETC) in Florence, a co-operative located in the territory of Rignano sull'Arno, which has approximately 20 hectares of cultivated land. Since March 2006, the co-operative has offered work experiences to people with autism and their families. Similarly, CoopSociale Agricola Terre Umbre with its project OpenFarmS and Cooperativa Sociale E.D.I.T., Arci Comitato Provinciale Terni, Arci Solidarietà Terni and Aladino Association with their project 'Le Pecore Gialle' is a model of socio-economic integration through community farming.

### **Best practices supporting people with Asperger Syndrome**

With specific reference to people with Asperger Syndrome, ENGIM organisation in the Piedmont region, has started the Asperger Connexion project in 2011, aimed at bringing many young people with Asperger syndrome and HFA closer to real job success, thanks to the collaboration between Training Centres and host partner companies.

Similarly, in Lombardy region, the Project Job4Aspie, implemented by Cooperativa Sociale Progetto il Seme, Lombardia Centro Servizi e Formazione, Associazione di Promozione Sociale LEM and Emergo Milan involves a training programme and a matching process with companies working in various sectors. The Association LEM, organises activities for the social inclusion of young people with HFA and Asperger. One of these projects is the Aspiecafé, which in addition to being a meeting place, organises various activities, such as a Philosophical Practice Workshop, a Theatre Group and the Aspieland blog. Among the people attending LEM's courses as of today, December 2020, 20% are young women aged between 25 and 40, with good schooling. Some of them have occasional jobs, others are looking for employment.

In the IT sector, a best practice is brought by Specialisterne which offers IT and administrative consulting services worldwide. They select and prepare people with autism or Asperger's for qualified and productive roles in digital, IT and administration. Similarly, Auticon employs exclusively young people with Asperger, for data analysis, test automation and complex software development projects, business consultancy, tapping into their precision and lateral thinking. In the office in Milan, out of 14 employees on 15 December 2020, there are 3 young Asperger's women, aged between 26 and 30, graduates, permanently employed as consultants.

With the project Per non dimenticare, led by BES Cooperative, in partnership with the Municipality of Milan, DIESIS Association, some bank foundations and ANED (National Association of former deportees), 8 young people with a diagnosis of HFA/Asperger's, including 3 girls, were engaged

in the digitisation of 30,000 names of people deported to the extermination camps from Northern Italy. The project started in September 2019 and ended in July 2020, confirming that people diagnosed with HFA/Asperger's can work, even in remote mode, as imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, the three girls showed significant social and work skills.

The Coop supermarket in Monza, opened this year, has been named as the first autism-friendly (without sensory barriers) supermarket in Italy. The idea and then the project came from three mothers, with the collaboration of the PizzAut Association. The Iranian architect Neshat Asgari designed the supermarket aisles were designed following the criteria of Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the efforts of ANFASS, the national association of families of PWD which since 2016 has created a new method to support the social and working inclusion of people with disabilities through its 'Anffas "Idee in Vetrina" (Showcasing Ideas)', an online e-commerce portal where all the items on display are created and made by people with disabilities.

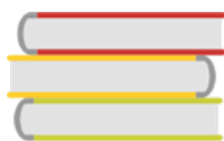


# VICTORUPESI

## Unity in diversity

Vocational Innovation using Creative new Technologies  
resulting in Upskilling Pathways for Social Integration

# National Report



# EDUFONS

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## 1. Desk Research

EDUFONS used secondary resources and literature to explore the topic of rural women and their social inclusion, including the needs of social media to aid inclusivity.

EDUFONS also developed connections with relevant stakeholders which enabled two other methods of research to be conducted for this study.

The desk research was conducted to look at aspects such as National legislation, policies, funding, initiatives supporting rural women in Serbia. The second part of the desk research referred to statistical data related to the profile of the target group - women in rural areas, their position and needs, with special reference to the use of vocational training. Finally, conclusions were drawn, summarized in the sections on opportunities and main challenges for rural women.



Target group profile: Rural women are exposed to multiple discrimination. They are at a disadvantage from both urban women and men from urban and rural areas. Additionally, we should keep in mind that rural women are not a unique or homogenous group and that there are large differences between them.

### Results of desk research:

#### 1. National legislation / strategies / policies / funding / initiatives supporting rural women in Serbia

The Government of the Republic of Serbia has identified the vulnerable groups in strategic documents and current policies, who are at higher risk of social exclusion and poverty, among them are women and the population living in rural areas. Hence, women living in rural areas are recognized as a vulnerable group and classified into several vulnerable groups, but rural women are not singled out as a separate vulnerable category. The only national strategic document within which, among other things, the category - women in the countryside is recognized is the National Strategy for Gender Equality period 2016 - 2020 with the Action Plan. So, there is no specific national strategy that deals exclusively with improving the position and inclusion of women from rural areas.

The same can be said about valid legal regulations.

Generally speaking, in the Republic of Serbia, there is no legislation that strictly and directly refers to the social inclusion of women in rural areas, as well as to the implementation of vocational training specifically targeted at women in rural areas. Laws that directly apply to the target group of rural women are laws that apply to a wider group of beneficiaries, including women in rural areas, and these laws thus help to improve the position of rural women at least to some extent.

## **I. LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

The protection of women from discrimination and respect for gender equality are the basis for the realization of human rights established by international documents confirmed by the Republic of Serbia. The process of including our country in European integration requires that the highest international standards resulting from these documents are respected in the realization and protection of basic human rights.

**Constitution of the Republic of Serbia** - the highest legal act of the Republic of Serbia guarantees human rights established by ratified international treaties, generally accepted rules of international law and laws, as well as equality of women and men and the development of equal opportunities policy. It proclaims the principle of equality before the Constitution and the law and prohibits direct and indirect discrimination on any grounds, including discrimination on the grounds of sex. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia stipulates that the Republic of Serbia may introduce special measures "to achieve full equality of persons or groups of persons who are essentially in an unequal position with other citizens." This constitutional provision opens space for developing gender equality policy and improving legislation, and the implementation measures aimed at eliminating discrimination against women. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia guarantees a set of economic rights that guarantee the right to employment, the right to work and the right of free choice of profession, for women and men under equal conditions.

**Law on Prevention of Discrimination** regulates the general prohibition of discrimination, forms and cases of discrimination and protection mechanisms. Among other things, this Law:

- obliges the state to implement comprehensive measures to prevent and protect against multiple discrimination, which is described as a severe form of discrimination;
- envisages the application of special measures introduced in order to achieve full equality, protection and progress of persons, i.e. groups of persons who are in an unequal position.

This law also contains provisions relating to non-discrimination in the field of labor, in the sense of the prohibition of determining equal opportunities for employment or enjoyment under equal conditions of all rights in the field of labor. It also guarantees everyone equal conditions and rights in terms of education and vocational training.

**Law on Gender Equality** regulates the creation of equal opportunities for the exercise of rights and obligations, the undertaking of special measures for the prevention and elimination of discrimination based on sex and the procedure for the legal protection of persons exposed to discrimination. Among other things, this Law:

- obliges all public authorities to pursue an active policy of equal opportunities, to monitor the implementation of the principle of gender equality in all areas of public life and the application of international standards and constitutionally guaranteed rights in this area;
- envisages taking special measures in order to eliminate and prevent the unequal position of women and men and to achieve equal opportunities for all sexes.

Anti-discrimination provisions and special measures envisaged to improve the position of members of vulnerable groups are covered by several laws. Specifically, related to the support of social inclusion of the target group - women in rural areas, as well as related to issues related to how to provide better training for this vulnerable group, professional skills and competencies (especially related to increasing social capital of this group), so that they can use them in the future to increase their economic capital, we single out the following laws:

**Law on Adult Education** provides the right to lifelong learning and training, and among other things, regulates areas such as access to and equal education opportunities.

The law recognizes 12 principles of adult education, including:

- Principle of accessibility - equal conditions for acquiring general and vocational education and inclusion in all levels, types and forms of education and learning;

- The principle of integrity - equal rights and opportunities to acquire education for personal development, social capacities and roles, employability, professional development and advancement;
- The principle of equal opportunities - inclusion and acquisition of education regardless of age, gender, difficulties and obstacles in development, disability, racial, national, social, cultural, ethnic and religious affiliation, language, sexual orientation, place of residence, material or health status and other personal characteristics

**Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance** is based on the principles: prohibition of discrimination in accordance with the law, impartiality in performing employment activities, gender equality, affirmative actions aimed at hard-to-employ unemployed persons, freedom in choosing occupations and jobs, free performance of employment activities for unemployed persons.

**Labor Law** prohibits direct and indirect discrimination against job seekers as well as employees.

**Other laws:** Law on Prevention of Harassment at the Workplace, Law on Social Welfare, Law on Health Care

**Law on Youth** guarantees that all young people are equal; that any discrimination or unequal treatment of young people, directly or indirectly, on any grounds is prohibited.

## II. OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL STRATEGIES

Regarding the existing strategies in the Republic of Serbia, there is no specific national strategy that deals exclusively with improving the position and inclusion of women from rural areas.

**National Strategy for Gender Equality period 2016 - 2020 with the Action Plan** - is the basic strategic document of the Republic of Serbia, which was adopted with the aim of improving gender equality. The strategy is particularly concerned with eliminating multiple discrimination and improving the position of multiple discriminated women (within which, among other things, it recognizes the category - rural women).

This strategy is complementary to the **Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination period 2014 - 2018**, which identifies women as one of the nine vulnerable social groups that are particularly exposed to the risk of discrimination and discriminatory treatment.

Among other national strategies, that in part deal with the promotion of gender equality and the position of women in this area, especially in terms of social inclusion of our target group - women in rural areas (as well as issues of how to provide better training for this vulnerable group and professional skills and competencies especially related to the increase of social capital of this group, so that in the future they can use them to increase their economic capital), we highlight the following:

- *The Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia period 2014–2024;*
- Strategy for Education Development in Serbia until 2020;
- Strategy for the Development of Adult Education in the Republic of Serbia;
- Strategy for the Development of the Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Serbia;
- Strategy of Career Guidance and Counseling in the Republic of Serbia;
- National Employment Strategy period 2011–2020;
- Strategy for the Support to Development of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, Entrepreneurship and Competitiveness for the period from 2015 to 2020 and the accompanying Action Plan;
- National Strategy for Youth for period 2015 - 2025;
- Strategy for Development of the Information Society in the Republic of Serbia until 2020;
- National Program for Agriculture for the period 2018-2020
- National Rural Development Program from 2018 to 2020

Within the National Strategy for Sustainable Development, the general improvement of rural areas is mentioned.

List of all strategies in the Republic of Serbia and access to them [here](#)

Also important are the First and Second National Reports on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction, as well as the National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 - Women, Peace and Security in the Republic of Serbia (2010-2015).

### **III. NATIONAL ACTORS IN THE INCLUSION OF THE POPULATION from vulnerable groups (including women from rural areas) and existing initiatives**

#### **GOVERNMENT SECTOR**

In terms of institutions, it is evident that there are many institutions, but none of them specifically deals with the inclusion of rural women, but they are providing programs/projects/initiatives that refer to a wider range of beneficiaries from vulnerable groups, including rural women.

There are also several concrete programs/projects/initiatives focused on women from rural areas.

**National Employment Service** is a government body with employment assistance services to all citizens of the Republic of Serbia, including women from rural areas. There is no specific body intended only for women from rural areas.

The advantage of this institution is the large distribution of branches where women in rural areas can turn for help. Also, the National Employment Service offers several different programs for inclusion in the labor market, which are free for the unemployed, and are also important for rural women:

- Professional practice
- Trainee program
- Program for acquiring practical knowledge for unqualified persons, surplus employees and long-term unemployed persons
- Clubs for active job search
- Training to start your own business
- Training for active job search
- Training for the labor market
- Training at the employer's request - for the unemployed
- Training for the employer's need for an employee
- Functional basic adult education
- Specialist IT training

Unemployed persons from the records of the National Employment Service have the opportunity to be included in the programs of additional education and training to acquire new knowledge, skills, competences, as well as acquire first work experience and get acquainted with the actual work environment. Additional education and training programs are created based on an annual survey of employers' needs for personnel.

The National Employment Service, through its network of branches, aims to provide assistance and support to unemployed persons in the form of services, programs and measures of active employment policy for a more competitive position on the labor market, to promote employment of persons from the categories of people who are more difficult to employ and offer quality support to employers in meeting specified employment requirements.



The National Employment Service enables an overview of vacancies based on online applications, the need for employment, as well as overview of public calls and competitions, information of relevance for applying to the register of unemployed persons and exercising rights in case of unemployment, and more. Employment advisors in the National Employment Service direct and guide unemployed persons through the entire job search process.

They also organize job fairs which enable the establishment of direct contact between job-seekers and employers.

*Subsidized Employment Programs* - Support for the employment of persons from the category of persons more difficult to be employed is provided through subsidized employment programs with an employer belonging to the private sector, while training for entrepreneurship development, self-employment subsidy program and mentoring program are available for unemployed persons with a quality entrepreneurial idea.

*IT retraining program* was conceived to contribute to the talent offer on the labor market fast. The previous pilot program was developed in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The project consists of two phases – 100 participants and 4 organizers of training participated in the first pilot phase. The second phase involves another 700 participants.

During 2019, National Employment Service supported programs such as the conference **Economic Empowerment of Women in Rural Areas**.

**Institute for Gender Equality** - For several years now, the Institute for Gender Equality has been organizing the **"Skills Academy"** program, which brings together women and men who are interested in improving their knowledge in the field of entrepreneurship or starting their own business. So far, a total of 76 students (59 women and 17 men) have gone through this type of training and education. In the past, the Institute has implemented the project **Business Connection of Women Living in Rural Areas**.

**The Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU)** actively participates in the creation of policies aimed at improving the position of vulnerable groups and respect for human rights through activities such as support for the development of the strategic and normative framework, analysis of mechanisms and systemic measures at the national and local level, development of project ideas of partner institutions and organizations.

They implemented a number of projects involving women from rural areas.

In 2020, the **Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of the Republic of Serbia** approved 27 projects on **digital skills training for women in rural areas** (raising the level of digital literacy and digital competencies of women from rural areas and capacity building of micro, small and medium enterprises, entrepreneurs and agricultural holdings in the field of e-commerce and e-business).

In 2020, the **Government of the Republic of Serbia**, in cooperation with Switzerland, implemented the project **"Sustainable Inclusion of Socially Marginalized Groups in Rural Areas"**. The project program aimed to contribute to the social inclusion of vulnerable social groups, especially those living in rural areas, through the improvement of existing and the establishment of innovative services in local communities.

## **NON-GOVERNMENTAL SECTOR**

When it comes to examples of good practices and initiatives for the inclusion of rural women, a number of them are present in the non-governmental sector. As well as examples of support for a wider group of marginalized users.

**Serbian project management association – IPMA Serbia**, with the support of the National Academy of Public Administration and the Chamber of Commerce of Serbia, in 2020 organized free online training for women entrepreneurs and those who want to become - **"Digital Women's Project Entrepreneurship"**.

**National Alliance for Local Economic Development (NALED)** - the initiative "Let's employ 1,000 women in rural areas". More than 350 women have found jobs within a year, with the aim of reaching

the number of 1,000 employed women in villages. The initiative “Let’s employ 1,000 women in rural areas” can be a good model to start new projects that will aim for the employment and self-employment of women and their economic independence and empowerment.

**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung foundation** has so far supported a number of projects to empower women from rural areas:

- *Consultative workshop Women as actors of rural development* - opportunities and challenges (Center for Democracy, 2018)
- Publication - *The Position of Women in the Labor Market* (Center for Democracy, 2017)
- *Analysis of Women in the Countryside - from invisibility to development potential* (Center for Democracy, 2018)

**Kolping Society of Serbia** implemented the project **Empowerment of Women in Rural Areas**, through which women received training in the following areas: hairdresser, home care, tailoring and sewing, decoupage.

Also, Kolping Society of Serbia offers the possibility of attending free accredited training for home care and assistance, intended for all motivated participants.

**German Cooperation in Serbia** is a foundation of the German government that has supported several projects aimed at marginalized groups:

- *Modernization of communal services* - a chance for seasonal workers in rural areas
- *Modernization of municipal services* - training for people from rural areas, from vulnerable groups
- *Initiative for inclusion* - support for the employment of returnees and hard-to-employ groups in the labor market

**The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)** implements activities in more than 170 countries and territories, including the Republic of Serbia. The focus is, among other things, on women's empowerment and gender equality.

**Women's Rural Network of Vojvodina (Ženska ruralna mreža Vojvodine)** was formed voluntarily by several civil society organizations and associations from Vojvodina, in accordance with the needs of civil society participation in decision-making processes and influence on improving the living conditions of women and youth in rural areas in the northern region of Serbia.

**TRAG Foundation**, among other things, supports projects that address the inclusion of women from rural areas.

There are initiatives **Women's Platform for Development of Serbia 2014 -2020**, **Platform for Development of Women's Entrepreneurship in Serbia**, and others.

#### **IV. CENTERS FOR VOCATIONAL TRAINING OF ADULTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

There are not many centers for vocational training of adults in the Republic of Serbia, and the low geographical distribution of the same is also a big problem. Except for the already mentioned National Employment Service, which offers the opportunity for professional development, in the form of mediation between candidates and the training centers, the location of the headquarters of the mentioned centers is often not in rural areas. The novelty, however, is the following: with the advancement of Internet availability, as well as with the overall digitalization of services, and especially with the new situation caused by the coronavirus, some of these centers offer the option of online learning.

#### **V. FUNDING OF THE SUPPORT, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT MEASURES**

Revenues of the National Employment Service mainly come from:

- a) The budget of the Republic of Serbia;
- b) The contributions for compulsory unemployment insurance - at the rate of 0.75%, at the expense of the employee (from salary), while the employer is exempt from paying part of the contribution that is

calculated and paid at the expense of the employer (0% from the company and 0.75% from the employee);

c) Donations.

These revenues are further allocated for the implementation of active employment measures (additional education and training, IT retraining, professional practice, training at the request of the employer, employment programs through financial support to employers for the employment of unemployed persons, subsidies for self-employment and similar)

a) Training programs of National Employment Service for unemployed in Serbia are free with no limited hours.

b) IT retraining - training program of the National Employment Service under the auspices of the Government of the Republic of Serbia

The program is cost-effective because a newly employed programmer will return the amount invested in training through taxes and contributions. It is anticipated that the investment will return to the state budget in less than a year (in about 6 months) through taxes and contributions, while the overall effect on Serbia's economy is much higher.

c) Training at the request of the employer to acquire additional knowledge and skills of the employee needed to perform jobs and work tasks to maintain employment with the employer (as special training or general training of the employee)

- is financed by the employer, while under special conditions and with additional approvals National Employment Service may subsidize

d) Training designed for commercial purposes and conducted by a publicly recognized provider of adult education activities and which a person attends on his own initiative for further training or retraining  
- is financed by a person who attends training according to the established price list of the education provider.

Women from rural areas also have access to other forms of support, including free training, through various projects funded by the government budget (local, provincial or state), governments of other countries or European Union funds.

## **2. Statistical data related to the target group - women in rural areas in Serbia**

**- position and needs, with special reference to the use of vocational training**

### **STATISTICS DATA**

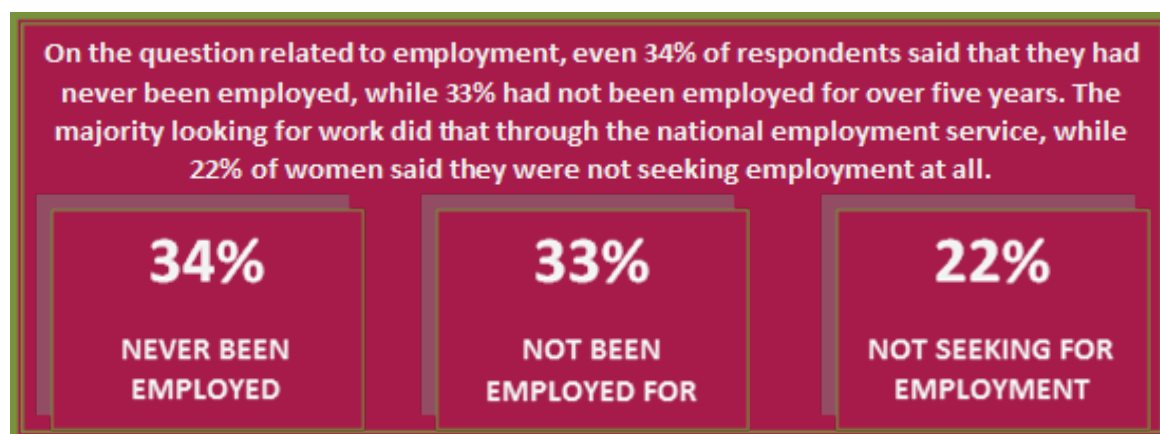
**Age:** Participation of women in the total population and by age groups - in rural settlements in Serbia, according to the last census from 2011: 15-39 (**28.2%**), 40-64 (**35.3%**), 65 and more (**22.9%**), 80 and more (**5.5%**). The average age is **44.9 years**.

**Major nationalities:** Serbian; in rural areas in Vojvodina (north region of Serbia) there is also a large population of Hungarian women, as well Roma (Roma women are also present throughout all parts of Serbia), Slovakian women and Romanian women. Also many other minorities.

**Unemployment:** In rural areas, 34% of women confirmed that they had never been officially employed. A percentage of 33% of women confirmed that they had not been employed for more than 5 years. A percentage of 22% of women confirmed that they do not seek employment at all<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Research conducted within the project Rural Women – Unutilized Potential, implemented by the association Women of the South and Association for Environmental Protection Stara Planina, supported by UNDP, Gender Equality Directorate and Pirot Municipality, 2009-2010



More than half of the unemployed people in rural areas are women (55%). Half of this percentage are young women 15-34. Third of the unemployed women, around 30%, are low skilled. Therefore, gender, age and level of education significantly determine the chances to participate in labor market.

This information indicates that the economic participation of rural women in Serbia is characterized by difficulties. Difficulties are reflected mostly in very low chances for employment in the non-agricultural sector, also in employment in low-productive activities within overall agricultural production, mostly on the family farms.

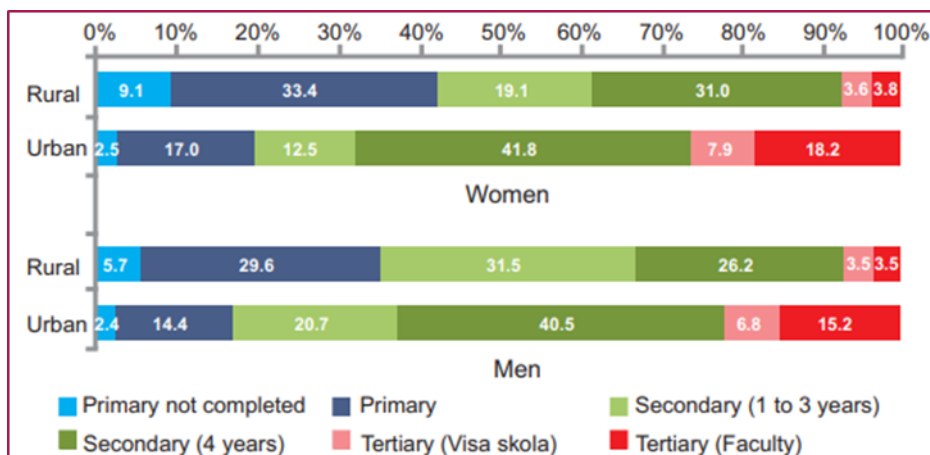
There is a variety of factors that creates problems and exclusion from the labor market of a large number of rural women. Lack of development of non-agricultural activities in rural areas, unfavorable infrastructural equipment of rural communities, distance from urban, and thus industrial and service centers are just some systemic factors that create small chances for their inclusion in non-agricultural sectors of the economy. Therefore, the availability of employment, training and education services is extremely important for employability, because the bearers of agricultural development and diversification of the rural economy should be primarily by the residents of rural communities, which means women. However, in the current environment, employment programs are usually not available to rural women. The results of the research show that the policy of encouraging employment significantly bypasses rural areas. As many as 76% of unemployed women have not heard of any active labor market measures, and only 13% have participated in one of the National Employment Service programs and assessed that these programs have not increased their opportunities for employment

**Level of Education**<sup>2</sup>: Illiterate 5.48% women, without primary school 30.4%, with incomplete secondary school 18.5%, with completed secondary school 36%, with higher education 6%.

	Urban settlements		Rural areas	
	M	F	M	F
No primary school	3.8%	9.9%	16.6%	30.4%
High school education	58.0%	50.0%	50.0%	36.0%
Higher education	23.0%	23.0%	6.2%	6.0%

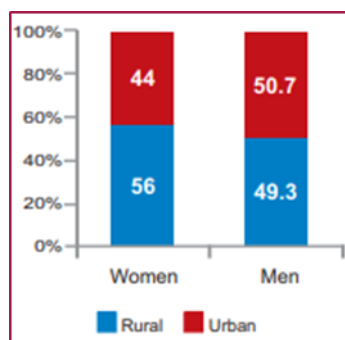
**Educational attainment**, by gender and urban or rural residence, 2013 (15–64, %)

<sup>2</sup> The 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia, Population, Census book no. 3, Educational Attainment, Literacy and Computer Literacy: data by municipalities and cities, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2013, p. 32–33.



Source: Based on 2013 SILC data

### Early school leavers



- by gender, and urban or rural residence 2013 (15–24 %)

Source: Based on 2013 SILC data

**Knowledge of Languages:** In a survey conducted in 2011, it is stated that 32% of rural women know a foreign language.

### THE USE OF VOCATIONAL TRAININGS

According to a survey conducted among 794 rural women<sup>3</sup>, the results are the following:

- More than ¾ of rural women said that never attend any of courses or training, after completing regular education
- The most educated respondents have already received additional training in over half of the cases
- The most uneducated respondents most often state that they are not interested in additional training, in almost 60%.
- More than half of the respondents with secondary education, although they have not attended the courses so far, would like to do so in the future 54.9%

In another study of the position of rural women<sup>4</sup>, we can find the following data:

- Only 2.8% of unemployed women attended some additional form of education (and those who did not attend additional education as the most common reason stated lack of money 40%, lack of interest 26%, distance 6%, and lack of supply of appropriate courses 9%)
- Among the additional skills possessed by women from the sample, skills that are not adequate to changes in the labor market predominate: 44% of women stated the skills of traditional crafts and handicrafts, 32% to know foreign languages, 39% to know how to use a computer, 31% to have technical skills, and 15% to know how to operate agricultural machinery.

The conclusion is that the educational capital of rural women is low, and opportunities for acquiring additional knowledge and skills are extremely scarce. Since the environment is not stimulating, the

<sup>3</sup> Blagojević, Marina, Rural Women in Vojvodina: Everyday Life and Rural Development (survey results), Provincial Gender Equality Institute, Novi Sad, 2010. Available from: <http://skr.rs/zaiX>

<sup>4</sup> Bogdanov, Natalija, ... [et al.]; Access for women and children to services in rural areas of Serbia and proposed measures to improve their situation; UNICEF Srbija, Beograd; 2011. (from Cvejić et al, 2010) p. 17–18. Available from: <http://skr.rs/zaiw>

motivation for additional education is weak, so women are more inclined to adopt skills that they can learn by inertia through their immediate social networks (mostly skills that have immediate practical significance).

Under the pressure of jobs and obligations, rural women are poorly motivated to be more active in the labor market. Most of them are not on the National Employment Service records or are not looking for a job in any other way, and they are generally not ready to get involved in training for acquiring additional skills and knowledge. When asked about their readiness to unite and connect in order to diversify their economic activities and improve their income, they reacted positively, accepting the idea, but realistically assessing that finding a market for products and services is a big problem, which reduces their motivation for this activity.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### ***Opportunities for rural women***

Regarding the level of literacy/illiteracy and all other above-mentioned information about the status of rural women, it is a necessity to create special measures for rural women empowerment, in order to improve their position and help them become more competitive for labor market challenges. Some of the measures can be:

- To organize computer, language and/or other types of courses, depending on specific needs of concrete rural women group
- To inform them about possible computer/language/other courses that are available for them (nearby educational centers, online)
- To educate them about using online opportunities for self-education and networking
- Provide retraining and/or additional training, and other types of programs
- To inform and educate them about the possibility of being retrained
- To encourage them to unite in networks and associations of rural women and use of benefits that practice can bring them
- To support them in education about good practices regarding their interest
- To inform them about their social rights, gender equality, and other legislations that can help their social inclusion
- To inform them about institutions/initiatives that support rural woman programs
- To educate them about entrepreneurship and funding opportunities
- To educate them to apply to funding opportunities

By listing these measures, it is obvious that rural women lack opportunities to become more included in society, even they are officially recognized as a vulnerable social group that should be in focus. Reality is that government is not paying enough attention and that non-governmental sector, therefore, can be of huge help in empowering rural women in the Republic of Serbia.

### ***Main challenges for rural women***

Regarding the situation of woman in rural areas in Serbia, presented by project researches so far, main challenges can be:

- Lack of time caused by huge occupation considering rural women households: agricultural and animal farming jobs, house maintenance (cooking, washing, cleaning, etc.), food supply, that are mostly women jobs in rural areas (considering the cultural context)
- Lack of time caused by occupation with children and elderly members of families. Rural women often live with elderly members of their or their husband family. Also considering

cultural context, it is expected for rural women to take care of children and elderly at the same time, 24 hours per day

- Lack of motivation for additional education/training caused by lack of free time and energy after a hard working day
- Analyses are also showing a low level of participation of rural women in local politics, that can concern them
- Economical situation of rural women is poor, often they do not have any personal income
- Access to services that can support their economical participation, or finding jobs out of their mostly agricultural/household context, is also low
- Educational programs that can support rural woman inclusion are usually not available in rural areas
- Rural women are poorly informed about educational possibilities
- They usually refer to government financial support
- They do not have full trust in the non-government sector, because of lack of understanding of it.

It is also important to notice that women have big potential in creating new jobs opportunities on their own, since they have, for example, traditional craft skills, which can be used for tourism purposes.

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## SECOND PHASE OF THE RESEARCH

- Conducted in Serbia during February 2021

EDUFONS conducted the next phase of research through focus groups and in-depth interviews by using a customized questionnaire for the target group - rural women.

EDUFONS used the same type of questionnaire for focus groups and in-depth interviews - with different questions for women from rural areas compared to questions for education providers/employers (companies).

Table 1 presents the dynamics of this phase of the research with the number of respondents involved.

Date	Research activity	Target group	Number of participants / respondents
05.02.2021.	FG	TG_4	4
05.02.2021.	FG	TG_3	4
08.02.2021.	I	TG_4	1
09.02.2021.	I	TG_4	1
09.02.2021.	I	TG_1	1
10.02.2021.	I	TG_1	1
10.02.2021.	I	TG_1	1
12.02.2021.	I	TG_1	1
12.02.2021.	I	TG_4	1
12.02.2021.	I	TG_1	1
17.02.2021.	I	TG_3	1
17.02.2021.	I	TG_1	1
17.02.2021.	FG	TG_1	4
19.02.2021.	I	TG_3	1
19.02.2021.	I	TG_3	1
19.02.2021.	I	TG_3	1
19.02.2021.	I	TG_3	1
26.02.2021.	FG	TG_3	5
Total:			31

### Research activity:

FG – Focus Group

I – In-depth interview

### Target group:

TG\_1 – Women from rural areas

TG\_3 – Practitioners/Lecturers - Adult Education Providers

TG\_4 – Employers/Companies

## 2. Focus Groups

The second part of this research consisted of focus groups. The aim of these discussions was to understand the training needs of rural women. The same set of questions, adapted to each organization realities, were asked by all partners to allow the partnership to compare results and prepare materials to suit the needs of all countries involved.

In total, **the number of target groups (TG): Rural women (TG1) with 4 participants; two Focus Groups of adult education providers (TG3) – one with 4 participants and second with 5 participants; and employers (TG4) with 4 participants** took part in these discussions and it should be noted that some of these target groups also took part in the in-depth interviews which are detailed below.



Number of participants and general characteristics:

Target group:	TG_1	TG_3	TG_3	TG_4
Number of participants/respondents:	4	4	5	4
Total participants/respondents:	17			

### 1st Focus Group

The target group of women from rural areas (TG1) included women living in rural areas, and the age structure is 35, 37, 38 and 60 years. So the average age is around 42 years.

Two participants are employed, while the other two participants belong to the NEET category.

### 2nd Focus Group

The target group of Practitioners / Lecturers - Adult Education Providers (TG3)

Participants had an average work experience of about 30 years.

Areas: teaching foreign languages, training adults in the program "Second Chance", preparation of educational TV reports on rural areas, quality management in food production

### 3rd Focus Group

The target group of Practitioners / Lecturers - Adult Education Providers (TG3)

Participants had an average work experience of about 15 years.

Areas: employees of the National Employment Service, Zrenjanin branch

### 4th Focus Group

The target group of employers (TG4) - a local family company located in a rural area

Areas: diversified activities – catering (confectionery and hostel) and production of plastic bags

They employ 7 people and have been working for about 20 years.

The jobs they do are mostly suitable for women, so they generally employ women.

### 3. In-depth Interviews

The recruitment process for these in-depth interviews:

- Field work and mapping (for TG1 and TG4)
- Research of relevant institutions dealing with adult education (for TG3, where the most competent lecturer selected by that institution took part in the interview)

All participants were previously contacted and gave their written consent to participate in the research.

Number of participants and general characteristics:

Target group:	TG_1	TG_3	TG_4
Number of participants/respondents:	6	5	3
Total participants/respondents:	14		

**The target group of women from rural areas (TG1)** included women living in rural areas, and the age structure is 18, 22, 27, 31, 35 and 53 years. So the average age is around 31years.

Two participants are employed, while the other four participants belong to the NEET category.

#### **The target group of Practitioners / Lecturers - Adult Education Providers (TG3)**

Participants had an average work experience of about 16 years.

Areas:

Public Library in Novi Becej

Center for Education and Culture Božidarac (organizer of the adult vocational education program)

University for the Third Age Đuro Salaj (expert associate in education for the third age)

#### **The target group of employers (TG4) - local companies located in a rural area**

The jobs they do are mostly suitable for women, so they generally employ women.

Areas:

Entrepreneur, working for more than 25 years – catering (cafe); 4 employees

Entrepreneur, working for more than 30 years – trade and agriculture (orchard); 1 employee and several seasonal workers

Entrepreneur, working for more than 30 years – catering and agriculture (vineyard); 6 employees and several seasonal workers

A diverse range of people belonging to vulnerable groups, vocational centers and companies were interviewed, with all ages involved in the process. This allowed the partnership to collect detailed data which included all ages, countries and situations.

## FINDINGS

The main findings from this research are as follows:

- The training should take into consideration

Existing laws and strategies do not enough recognize rural women as a separate vulnerable category, so there are no specific programs to facilitate their employment, further education and greater social inclusion.

In terms of experience and problems faced in rural areas, rural women referred mainly to the situation related to job search, exercising the right to work and finding decent employment, exclusion from society due to different interests, bureaucratic difficulties, lack of free legal aid, lack of certain health services (eg speech therapist for a child, psychological counselling).

Considering how they try to solve the problems listed above, which they face, the respondents stated that they do so mainly through conversations with friends and family. However, this type of support is advisory in nature and often does not end with them essentially finding a solution to their problem. It turned out that women from rural areas generally do not turn to institutions for help, so in most cases, they remain denied help. As the main reason for that, they stated that they do not really know who to turn to.

Women from rural areas are mostly informed in the circle of their family or by friends/acquaintances, and less often in local competent institutions. Only in some cases do they find out new information through the media, but mostly superficially or with a delay. From this, it can be concluded that women from rural areas mostly use unreliable sources of information and that the information that reaches them is incomplete and untimely.

Regarding the information about the vacancy, the respondents stated that they usually find it through advertisements and social networks, but also that they go directly to the employers on their own initiative. Also, they mentioned that the information related to the job offer was mostly not updated so that even though the job is already filled, the ad is still open.

### **Rural areas often offer fewer opportunities compared to urban ones**

Infrastructure - lack of adequate infrastructural equipment of rural communities and poor traffic connections. In many rural areas, the internet connection is poor (often interrupted, weak or slow flow). Also, the mobile signal is weak or missing.

Education - characteristics of rural areas are the lack of educational possibilities, there is a small offer of programs for vocational education and retraining. The state does not recognize adult education (especially in rural areas) as a priority. As a consequence, retraining centres, which used to be much more present in smaller communities, are closing.

Employment - there are few chances for employment (especially the employment opportunities for people with higher education). The lack of perception of non-agricultural activities is typical, so often the potentials for the development of other activities are not used in rural areas.

### **The rural environment is often not stimulating for women - obstacles and fewer opportunities**

Participation and Inclusion - women in rural areas have fewer opportunities to participate in social life and local policies. Due to a lack of dedicated organizations, there are no organized ways to include vulnerable groups in many areas.

Exercise of rights - rural women are often unaware of the laws and rights they have, thus they are often denied and face obstacles that cannot overcome, which they would easily cope with if they know their rights.

Information - women from rural areas are often unaware of the opportunities offered to them. Information provided through institutions usually does not reach them, and they are also poorly informed about educational possibilities. Current national regulations (legislative/systemic) provide for certain measures to include women from rural areas in vocational education or retraining, but often information about this does not reach them.

### **Additional education for rural women - limitations, needs and obstacles**

Availability and access - educational services are usually not available because centers that offer vocational training for adults and retraining are located in larger cities. So, for women from rural areas, attending various accredited training/courses requires additional effort. The distance of training centers often discourages women from rural areas from further training or retraining. Also, women in rural areas are in charge of household chores and often of agricultural work, so this greatly affects their motivation and their choice regarding the day and time of the training or workshop.

Economic situation - rural women are often poor and/or have no personal income. So, it is essential for them to receive information about free programs since they are usually not ready or unable to pay for them.

Lack of motivation - Women from rural areas are often not motivated enough to receive additional training.

It is very important for women from rural areas that the course they attend offers them new knowledge and skills that would be useful for them and that would have a practical application. They like to see on someone's example that he succeeded, that some additional effort paid off, so that, they can go that way as well. Certainly, it is important to intensify the promotion of activities that can bring them concrete benefits, so that they recognize the chance for themselves.

Online education - There is a noticeable increase in the number of training offers that are organized over the Internet. But, women from rural areas prefer live education. Most women from rural areas are not digitally literate, especially those of older age or with lower education. Also, obstacles are the lack of money and adequate equipment and infrastructure for consuming online training (quality internet and computer equipment).

In order to be able to educate themselves online, most rural women must first overcome the basic use of digital tools and then learn through their use.

### **Digitization and new opportunities for women in rural areas.**

The increasing use of ICT tools and social media/networks have a significant impact on the future education and employment of women in rural areas. The aforementioned is particularly interesting because it opens up more opportunities for women to engage in non-agricultural work and open up multiple opportunities for them to do better-paid jobs (including working from home).

#### Main difficulties:

- Lack of knowledge related to computer use and/or access to and use of different applications/user interfaces
- Less-educated women and older women continue to face problems in the application and use of ICT tools and social networks. They are dependent on younger family members who could help or guide them.

Partners should provide participants with **clear instructions** on

- Purpose of the training, goals and expected general outcomes
- Specific training outcomes (learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes)
- Time frame and course duration
- Training plan and program (by modules)
- Methods of the work and learning
- Manner of conducting training and technical requirements
- The importance of training for the well-being of the participants
- Opportunities for participants after attending training

● **Flexible training is essential** - many of the target group may have

1. Problem with **technical possibilities**: Adapt training in an online format so that they are easy to understand, and to be accessible for women from rural areas, as well as not set high demands in terms of internet speed, technical equipment of users or level of handling the required technique. It is important to keep in mind certain limitations in rural areas: poor or bad infrastructure, low quality of internet connection, as well as barriers in terms of skills and knowledge of using ICT tools and social networks by women from rural areas (especially those who are older and/or of lower education).

2. Problem with the **organization of free time**: It should be kept in mind that women from rural areas have specific daily activities. When planning support measures and educational activities for rural women, it should be anticipated that the huge pressure of duties, household chores and agricultural work could make it difficult for them to be actively involved in the programs.

3. Problem with **motivation to get involved in education**: Lack of motivation for additional education/training caused by lack of free time and energy after full-time working day, dedication to household chores and care for other household members.

4. The need for **additional mentoring support**: women from rural areas often have difficulty using computers and/or applications in an online environment, therefore, for the training to give good results, support is needed both before and after the training, which can significantly improve the expected outcomes.

Flexible (customized) training should be interesting for women by offering them concrete, tangible solutions for their situation.

● From the focus groups and interviews, it can be noted that the **participants are keen to**

⇒ Improve **soft skills**: 3 top soft skills that rural women think they lack, and which would help them improve their economic and sociological status and overcome the problems they face are Leadership, Communication skills, Decision making.

Mostly, rural women believe that they need these skills in order to communicate more efficiently, more argumentative and show greater determination and self-confidence.

⇒ Regarding the **need for training**, the following areas have been identified (classified into four categories: social inclusion, digital skills, increasing employability, and other)

1) Social inclusion	
Topic	Subtopic
Self-empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- interpretation of the law and rights of women from rural areas</li> <li>- improving the position and participation in society</li> <li>- communication with people</li> <li>- self-efficacy training</li> </ul>
2) Digital skills	
Topic	Subtopic
Basic training in the ICT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- using computers and digital tools</li> </ul>
Communication via Internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- using e-mail</li> <li>- official address to institutions and asking for help/solutions/answers</li> <li>- using online tools such as different platforms (Zoom, Discord, Skype)</li> </ul>
Access to information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- obtaining the right information</li> <li>- finding and reaching the desired information</li> <li>- finding and accessing up-to-date information directly from institutions</li> <li>- finding free courses on the Internet (foreign languages, ICT, etc.)</li> <li>- locating information about opportunities and support funds for women from rural areas</li> </ul>
Learning to use digital tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- content creation (text, tables, files, etc.) / use of Word and Excel</li> <li>- basic knowledge of social networks - how they work, how they can be used for personal presentation or for marketing products and services (how to design an advertising campaign)</li> <li>- using platforms/applications for online learning</li> <li>- digital marketing</li> <li>- using a mobile phone for photography</li> <li>- handling simple photo processing applications</li> <li>- building customer relationships (loyalty &amp; advocacy)</li> <li>- choosing of platforms / social networks for profile creation</li> <li>- social media and social networks management</li> <li>- applying for free courses on the Internet (foreign languages, ICT, etc.)</li> <li>- applying for support funds for rural women's training and/or easier access to online networking</li> </ul>
Learning through the use of digital tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- using free courses (foreign languages, ICT, etc.)</li> <li>- realizing and achieving self-learning</li> </ul>
3) Increasing employability	
Topic	Subtopic
Self-employment/entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- starting your own business (start-up, entrepreneurship)</li> <li>- training aimed to improve the skills and competencies for starting and running your own business</li> </ul>
Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- compiling a CV, cover letter</li> <li>- creating profiles on platforms that are visible to employers</li> <li>- job search and job application, interview for a job</li> </ul>
4) Other	
Topic	
Assistance to victims of violence (children, women, domestic violence)	
Creative workshops – do it yourself (DIY)	

- ⇒ Regarding the **learning process**, the conclusion is that it is the most appropriate to organize:
- considering face-to-face format, and depending on the topic, learning can be designed as combination of online and face-to-face learning (but in such a way that lessons are realized "in presence", while the further course of lectures can take place online in the form of discussions);
- on weekdays (Monday to Friday) in the evening (after 5 pm) - when participants finish their daily duties;

- lasting from 45 minutes to 2 hours (with breaks) for an individual workshop or training session;
- in the total duration of training, up to 3 months, with one or two workshops weekly.

When it comes to the duration of a complete training/course, it has been shown that women from rural areas are generally willing to set aside as much time for additional training as needed, if it would bring them useful knowledge and practical skills applicable to improve their status and employability.

⇒ **Other aspects** related to conducting a successful training/workshop are:

- to make the topic interesting and useful, as well as to offer something new and innovative
- to be based on experience and actual practice, so that a significant emphasis is placed on the presentation of examples from practice (real, convincing, achievable examples)
- to have sessions with debates so that everyone can express their opinion and argue their views
- that the work is organized in smaller groups
- ensure interactivity and equal participation of all participants
- short instructions and/or brochures with prominent parts and understandable illustrations (visual presentation is important)
- that the atmosphere/ambience is pleasant (that it is calm and quiet)

The training/workshop should be interactive, detailed, simplified and contain a practical part.

⇒ **Method of communication and communication tools**

Regarding way of communication with family and friends, it is obvious that women from rural areas prefer face-to-face conversation. In addition, they equally communicate by phone (mostly mobile phone), but also use social networks.

In terms of communication tools that enable free exchange of messages and calls, such as social networks and applications, the most popular among women from rural areas is Facebook, followed by Viber and Instagram.

- Partners should be aware that **training needs are different for each participant** and training should be planned accordingly.

It should be borne in mind that there are vast differences between rural women – they are not a unique or homogenous group.

It is extremely important that the workshop/training is tailored to the needs of women from rural areas, taking into account the characteristics of the area and the mentality of participants (some women in rural areas are shy, modest, slower to react and all this should be taken into account)

In terms of social networks, experience in working with women from rural areas shows that some of them are in modern trends and regularly use social media, while there are a large number of them who are not in contact with social networks, and even shy away from them. This is especially true for older rural women. You should keep in mind that such participants need a tailored approach and additional mentoring support.

### **Other relevant findings**

Individual online training that a rural woman would access from her home is difficult to implement. The solution could be to organize online training in a group with a mentor/instructor to help them use computers and access different applications (for example, to gather a number of rural women in a local community/library/school or similar institution that has access to computer equipment - the appropriate number of computers equal to the number of participants).



Having in mind the expansion of online sales and business (in terms of services, products, but also offering yourself as an expert), the emphasis should be placed on:

- accessible, free and easy to use social networks that make it easier to reach customers or employers
- increasing the motivation and awareness of women in rural areas to increase their ability to work independently by improving their digital literacy (use of email, creating a CV, creating a profile on the LinkedIn platform) and order to improve their position and help them become more competitive for labor market challenges.

Given that rural women are largely engaged in agricultural production for the market, the emphasis should be placed on online tools that enable greater visibility, promotion, marketing and sales. Women from rural areas need skills and knowledge that will enable them to better present their brand, to better position themselves on the market.

- creating profiles and using the LinkedIn platform to improve visibility and recognizability
- using social networks to promote and market products and services (Instagram is very practical for promoting services and/or products because its configuration provides the ability to create "own shop window open to the whole world"), options on Facebook such as online sales or the formation of pages and/or groups are very suitable for offering and selling services/products)
- digital marketing and acquisition of knowledge/skills for own business presentation, promotion of products/services, research of market position concerning the competition, finding the necessary information

The increasing use of ICT tools has a great impact since some new opportunities are opening up, new jobs and ways of doing business are being created. In that sense, the opportunity to work from home can be very suitable for women from rural areas. On the other hand, since rural women are otherwise less socially active, this can negatively affect their socialization. So, this can lead to them being even more limited to the home environment - that is, to functioning in a very narrow circle of people. Hence, it is necessary to find a balance in that, due to the danger that they will be additionally overwhelmed with everyday household chores. Also, it is noticeable that the use of ICT tools leads to the loss of interpersonal relationships.

## How are we going to use these findings?

When developing the training materials, the partners will ensure that the content is **clear and easy to understand**, consisted of all the relevant information needed to use **different social media platforms**, and also included information on **safety and security** when using the platforms. With regards to language barriers, all partners **translated the materials into English, Swedish, Italian, Serbian, Slovenian, Romanian and Spanish** to aid the training in the different countries.

When training starts, each partner organization should consider ensuring **that flexible training options are given** to suit those involved, and the **online learning platform** will also be used to supplement the training, in case any information needed reiterating.

### Other ways of using the findings

To develop:

- ⇒ Learning material and literature (references or database of useful sites, tutorials...)
- ⇒ Theoretical part + practical work and mentoring
- Explanation of the theoretical background in a user-friendly way
- Presentation of various examples of good and bad practice
- Show "best used scenario"
- Assignment of tasks - so that participants can use the theoretically acquired knowledge and experience, as well as apply their knowledge
- Question and answer sections; discussion development
- Adequate accompanying brochures / manuals - visually designed to highlight important segments, as well as displays through graphics, bubbles, "comic illustrations" and similar

In general, it is desirable to emphasize as much live contact, practice, practical demonstration or, if it is online - that the training is in real time, not recorded.

It is important to carefully create desirable measures for supporting rural women social inclusion, so they can clearly see potential benefits for themselves, and try to find time and energy to fully engage themselves in order to make better future, by participating in modern job market possibilities, that can bring them easier and better-paid jobs.

## The importance of diversity management!

VICTORUPESI consortium consist out of very divers partners serving very diverse beneficiaries. This represents a micro mirror of the societies each of our beneficiaries are living in and is really important to build the ground for holistic approaches.

Reasons for having holistic approaches in Serbia:

- The Internet opens the global labor market for everyone, regardless their place of residence
- Employers in Serbia, as well as in the European labor market, ask/expect the same or similar competencies, skills and knowledge from candidates in accordance with the type of job

- Raising awareness of the possibilities of equal participation in the European labor market and that they can be more actively involved and better positioned thanks to the developed digital competencies
- There is a noticeable increase in the popularity of teleworking and freelance options
- There are equal dangers in terms of safety and security when using online platforms, applications, social networks, etc.

### **The overviews of digital skills**

The world is changing significantly, hence the need to keep up to date with technology. With technology advancing at an incredible speed, it is important that we are not lagging behind these changes.

Reasons for having good digital skills in Serbia:

- To help you showcase your personal brand online. This enables employers to explore your digital competences.
- Many employers now require you to have some basic online skills, such as being able to use certain applications and software, in order to get a job.
- Whether you are an employer or an employee, businesses use digital skills to promote and market their brand, service and/or ethos so having these skills is hugely beneficial!
- Digital skills can also be advantageous in unpredictable times, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, where working from home became the new, temporary norm.
- Being digitally active can also increase your networks. This could be for social purposes or employment seeking purposes. Build yourself a profile online to engage with people and make new connections.

### **Also:**

- To encourage rural women to unite in networks and associations and use benefits that practice can bring them (especially in establishing networks/associations that are informal like Facebook groups, or dedicated networking platforms for the exchange of experience and knowledge). There is an obvious need for women from rural areas to connect, associate and develop production activities on the basis of cooperatives (especially in terms of agriculture)
- To use online opportunities for self-education (computer, language and/or other types of courses)
- The use of ICT tools and social networks has a significant impact on the future of education and employment of women from rural areas – opportunities for inclusion in additional training (in rural areas there are often limited opportunities to attend courses/training), as well as work from home, finding more profitable jobs outside the rural community in which they live (especially important for rural areas where employment opportunities are limited), reorientation to work in non-agricultural activities.
- A job position that requires digital skills can involve different activities and is open in different companies and almost indispensable for the functioning
- The expansion of digital tools is evident in all spheres of life. Digital literacy has become a part of the general culture and an indispensable part of a quality CV of a person who is looking for a job.
- We live in a world of digital communication, so using email professionally correctly is very important - the way a person communicates by email is often an indicator of literacy in general and it is necessary to demonstrate basic communication and

digital skills in this regard.

- Finding and using the information on the Internet, access to up-to-date information directly from institutions, as well as various open-source tools and resources open up countless opportunities for personal and professional advancement.
- Using the phone as a tool for digital marketing purposes. Phone photography - using a mobile phone as a useful tool in creating and placing content
- Simplified photo processing techniques, as well as applications that can help create content for social networks – to promote services or products
- Digital literacy provides a quality basis for upgrading more complex skills such as web development, digital marketing, SEO, and similar.

## **The overviews of the political context in each of the partners countries**

General social objectives of adult education in Serbia are the enhancement of the educational structure, an increase of employability, reduction of poverty, formation of the basis for economic development, better flexibility of the labour force and general improvement of life quality. The need for re-entering the education system arises from a fairly low educational structure of the general population, high unemployment rates, the low educational structure of the working population and stagnating population growth (the Republic of Serbia, Strategy for the Development of Adult Education).

According to the Law on Adult Education, adult education is part of the Serbian education system and its purpose is to provide adults with continuous acquisition of competences and qualifications that are crucial for their employment, professional development and socially responsible behaviour.

Adults participating in vocational training programmes, at the secondary education level, are persons aged 17 and over.

Adult education is realized as formal education, informal education and informal learning.

As an organized and systematic activity of learning intended for people above a certain age, adult education can be formal or non-formal. There are two types of programmes:

- general formal education, which aims to raise achievement in basic skills
- vocational formal education, aiming to acquire a recognized qualification during adulthood and directed towards acquiring or improving vocational competences required for participation in the labour market.

Vocational formal Adult education is based on the approved national curricula within the secondary education systems, as regulated by the law. Although based on the mainstream secondary education concept, achievement standards for these programmes are adjusted to the adult population.

There are **legislative and systemic measures regarding additional vocational education and retraining**, but women from rural areas are not sufficiently recognized (not singled out as a special vulnerable category). Besides, this type of information does not reach women from rural areas, so they do not use what could help them. Taking this into account, the existing regulations and solutions do not sufficiently include women from rural areas. Additional stimulant measures are always desirable. It is necessary to create a stimulating environment tailored to the needs of women from rural areas, both in terms of financial support and designed measures, but also the educational programs themselves.

**Adult education centers** fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, but there are no subsidies or adequate support aimed at strengthening this field of education and increasing the availability of the services they offer. Thus, although adult education and lifelong learning are recognized in national strategies and laws, in practice they are not adequately stimulated.

As women from rural areas are particularly disadvantaged in **the labor market**, they need more comprehensive and long-term support. Government measures to increase employability exist to some extent, but they are not sufficient, especially for a category such as women from rural areas. In terms of employability and the labor market, the category of women from rural areas does not have a special priority status (there is no form of positive incentives through which employers would be stimulated to give priority to rural women in employment). Given that women in rural areas face many difficulties, it would be desirable to introduce incentives that would apply specifically to this group. Depending on the obstacles they face, it makes sense to combine several programs and synchronize the provision of additional services in the field of social protection.

**In terms of digitalization**, it is noticeable that this area is one of the priorities for the Serbian government. In accordance with that, numerous activities for the development of e-services are being carried out, as well as actions to raise awareness of the importance of digital literacy and stimulate projects on this topic.

## **The overviews of the funding of vocational education in each of the partners countries**

### **Adult Education and Training Funding in Serbia<sup>5</sup>**

#### **Main funding principles**

Adult vocational education is primarily implemented in public secondary schools, but can also be organized in other institutions licensed for the implementation of adult education study programmes. Other institutions may include public agencies, public companies, employment agencies, business and other organizations.

Adult education vocational programmes are implemented:

- in secondary schools as a regular part of their practice
- within other organizations established to provide additional training and retraining.

According to the [Law on Adult Education](#), adults do not pay the fees for participation in the education programmes for the first occupation training.

#### **Fees Paid by Learners**

*Vocational adult education programmes leading to the learners' first vocation* are free of charge for the participants (financed from the state and/or local authorities' budgets, in compliance with the annual plan which is issued by the Government each year, prior to the start of the school year).

For all *other levels and programmes*, fees are determined by respective schools and organizations. Other programmes may be financed from other sources, either individually or jointly by different financiers.

These sources include the following:

- Government;
- Local authorities;
- Learners;
- Private employers;
- NGOs;
- International organisations and funds.

Additional training and retraining are predominantly financed by companies, employers, employees

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<sup>5</sup> EURYDICE: National Policies - Adult Education and Training Funding (Serbia).

Available from: [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/adult-education-and-training-funding-66\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/adult-education-and-training-funding-66_en)

and other clients.

### **Financial Support for Adult Learners**

While for formal adult education there are no special support programmes in the form of loans, scholarships or other state measures, fees paid by adult learners pay are significantly below economic calculations.

Some schemes of financial support are available for some adults who are involved in some non-compulsory programmes. Namely, adults who are participants of labour market training created by the [National Employment Service \(NES\)](#) can receive financial support. During the training, under the contract, the NES pays some costs for the training provider (costs of realization of the training programme) and some for the trainee/eligible adult (the amount of up to 7,000.00 RSD monthly as financial support, covering the transport costs and insurance contributions in case of injuries at work).

The other scheme of financial support is available at the request of the employer in case the unemployed adults perform the specific job. The National Employment Service pays:

- to the employer (participation in financing the training costs)
- to the unemployed adult (monthly financial support and the transportation costs)

### **Private Education**

The fees are determined by the institutions and vary depending on the training staff and types of programmes.

### **The overviews of the local companies and industries available to hire our beneficiaries in each of the partners countries**

Local employers point out that they currently do not need new workers (which is especially caused by the Covid-19 situation). Notwithstanding, all interviewed employers pointed out that their employment policy is sensitive. They pay attention to providing opportunities to people from disadvantaged categories, so when choosing candidates, they try to hire people who are vulnerable or feel excluded.

Regarding the selection of candidates, in addition to the qualifications required for the job, employers, among others, emphasize criteria such as readiness and willingness to work, fair and responsible approach to the job.

As for digital skills, employers stated that it is always commendable and desirable for employees to have the skills to create and share content on social networks to present the company in a good light and thus make additional advertising. Also, the importance of these skills is reflected in better communication with customers and stakeholders.

Finally, the common view is that it would be helpful to create and establish local employment policies, taking into account the needs of employers. Accordingly, incentive measures for rural women could be adopted.

In modern times, employers often expect their employees to have solid management of ICT tools and social networks, and such expectations will increase further in the future. Areas and industries in which rural women with improved digital competencies could be employed are:

- Agriculture
- Tourism and catering
- IT sector
- Public institutions (health, education...)
- Creative work/industry

## Appendix

### Some Centres for Adult Vocational Training in Serbia:

1. Center for Education and Culture “Božidarac”, Belgrade ([www.bozidarac.rs](http://www.bozidarac.rs))
2. Center for Education “Đuro Salaj”, Belgrade ([www.djurosalaj.co.rs](http://www.djurosalaj.co.rs))
3. Center for Education “Braća Stamenković”, Belgrade ([www.bracastamenkovic.edu.rs](http://www.bracastamenkovic.edu.rs))
4. People’s University in Niš ([www.nunis.edu.rs](http://www.nunis.edu.rs))
5. People’s University “Svetozar Marković”, Belgrade ([www.nusvetozarmarkovic.edu.rs](http://www.nusvetozarmarkovic.edu.rs))
6. People's Universities in Šabac ([www.univerzitetsabac.com](http://www.univerzitetsabac.com))
7. People’s University in Vranje ([www.narodniuniverzitetvranje.edu.rs](http://www.narodniuniverzitetvranje.edu.rs))
8. People’s University in Trstenik ([www.narodnits.rs](http://www.narodnits.rs))
9. Open University “Znanje”, Zemun ([www.ouznanje.co.rs](http://www.ouznanje.co.rs))
10. Open University in Subotica ([www.openunsubotica.rs](http://www.openunsubotica.rs))
11. Education Center “Academy”, Čačak ([www.akademija.edu.rs](http://www.akademija.edu.rs))
12. Academy “Oxford” – number of places in Serbia ([www.akademijaoxford.com](http://www.akademijaoxford.com))

There are also online platforms (such as The Campster [www.thecampster.com](http://www.thecampster.com), Tailor's School [www.krojacevaskola.com](http://www.krojacevaskola.com)) that mainly offer IT-related courses



# VICTORUPESI

## Unity in diversity

Vocational Innovation using Creative new Technologies  
resulting in Upskilling Pathways for Social Integration

# National Report

Persons involved:

Iulia Halangescu

Tatjana Ristovski

Yagmur Yilmaz



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



## 1. Desk Research

IKF Malmö conducted a desk research focusing on foreign-born women's accession to the labor market in Sweden. Therefore, we investigated different aspects of the issue to address better the gaps in terms of vocational training and spot the available funding as well as the local initiatives to support the inclusion of foreign-born women. We also evaluated the Swedish legal framework including the policies which is applicable to the needs of our target group. The existing strategies in Sweden to deal with the concerns of foreign-born women's inclusion in the labor market is also examined. In addition, in our desk research, we tried to identify and list the public and private organizations in Sweden to contact in later stages for conducting a focus group discussions and in-depth interviews.



### **National legislation / policies / funding / initiatives supporting migrant women's inclusion in the labour market**

#### **Legislation and Policies**

Desk research of the Victorupesi project is conducted to identify the national legislation and policies. Also, the funding opportunities and initiatives supporting migrant women's inclusion in the labour market. The Swedish legislation is designed in a way which gives responsibility to the State to take measures aimed at eliminating unemployment while adhering the standards of right to work.<sup>6</sup>

The State has specific policies which promotes easier access to labor market. For example, in Prop 2017/18:1 Utgiftsområde 24, chapter 3.7; the Government recognised that more efforts are needed to strengthen foreign-born women to enter the labour market. The measures that contribute to create easier paths to jobs and more jobs with lower qualification requirement is required to be taken into account.<sup>7</sup> Also, the Swedish Public Employment Service is developed an action plan at the beginning 2017 on behalf of the government and it aimed to increase the proportion of foreign-born women in the working force.<sup>8</sup>

The Government also targeted thematic areas such as utilizing job potential for the green industries in 2018-2019. Therefore, newly arrived people and people far away from the labour market

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/demokrati-och-manskliga-rattigheter/fakta-om-manskliga-rattigheter/ekonomiska-sociala-och-kulturella-rattigheter/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.regeringen.se/4a65cf/contentassets/79f6d27416794f0bb146c792e02b65fc/utgiftsomrade-24-naringsliv.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/download/18.47a458fb16df81b913353bd/1574677167971/rapport-en-arbetsmarknad-for-alla.pdf>

without higher education, not women specifically but with equality in mind, could access to the job market.<sup>9</sup>

The Swedish Public Employment Service stated in their yearly report that their activities must be design in a way that promote gender equality and increase foreign-born women's activity in the labour market: 1. Foreign-born women must receive the support they need to get closer to the labour market, 2. to actively work for a more even distribution of program decisions between women and men, 3. ensure that independent actors provide support to foreign-born people, and to a greater extent foreign-born women far from the labour market, 4. that the national supplier follow - up conducts special audits of independent actors and current services from a gender equality perspective with the aim of follow outcomes and capture the actors' experiences.<sup>10</sup>

The women with entrepreneurial interest are also considered since the Government and the Ministry of Trade and Industry gave Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth a mission to enable efforts so that foreign-born women will be able to start their own businesses. For example, mentorship and networking support which may enable women to get in contact with the labour market. The project timeline is defined between 2018-2022.<sup>11</sup>

### **Funding**

There are various funding agencies which provided support for the foreign-born women's employment with their projects in Sweden.

The Swedish Public Employment Service in Malmö created the project named "Kick off" in collaboration with FC Rosengård. Target group foreign born women far from labour market. It focused on health, information about the society, integration, and family.<sup>12</sup>

European Social Fund (ESF) is another funding agency which have several projects with the cooperation of number of municipalities and Swedish Public Employment Service and civil society. "Värmland tillsammans" is one of those projects by several municipalities in Värmland, the country council in Värmland, the Swedish Public Employment Service and the civil society. It is funded by ESF. The project aims to support foreign-born women and men to come closer to the labour market or further studies.<sup>13</sup> In Stockholm, ESF finances "Hållbar etablering" project which focuses on facilitation for the entry into the labour market for newly arrived persons with a short educational background. The project has a specific focus on foreign-born women.<sup>14</sup> For the newcomers regardless of their gender, ESF funded another project called "Etableringeslyftet 2.0" with the vision is to utilize the new skills of the new arrivals in an efficient and coordinated manner and to actively contribute to them getting closer to self-sufficiency. This will be done partly through individualized efforts for mapping, simplified validation, matching, professional introduction, and language development.<sup>15</sup> Finally, ESF has funded "Amazon Projects" which are based on government-wide platforms that will deepen collaboration for women on long-term sick leave and / or the long-term unemployed with a great need

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.regeringen.se/4af042/contentassets/e6b42c9045bb4d78a3adc66d765500aa/07501-uppdrag-att-tillvarata-jobbpotential-inom-de-grona-naringarna.pdf>

<https://www.skogsstyrelsen.se/globalassets/om-oss/publikationer/2019/rapport-2019-05-tillvarata-jobbpotentialen-i-de-grona-naringarna---naturnara-jobb.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/download/18.47a458fb16df81b9133effd/utrikesfodda-kvinnor.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://tillvaxtverket.se/download/18.2e832f28168bb82933b29493/1549550917214/Regeringsuppdrag%20att%20fr%C3%A4mja%20utrikes%20fr%C3%B6dda%20kvinnors%20fr%C3%B6retagande%202018-01-11.pdf>

<https://www.regeringen.se/4948a5/contentassets/5902ae60335a4aa99db41ce2c0f7b266/n18-01430.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/om-oss/press/pressmeddelanden?id=8CBF51F92175E33B>

<sup>13</sup> <https://varmlandsprojektparaply.se/projekt/varmland-tillsammans/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.esf.se/Resultat/Projektbanken-2014-2020/Alla-Projekt/Hallbar-etablering/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.sll.se/verksamhet/Regional-utveckling/Nyheter/2020/06/78-miljoner-till-projekt-inom-kompetensforsorjning-och-konkurrenskraft/>

for support to establish themselves in the labour market. The target group is Swedish- and foreign-born women of working who are far from the labour market.<sup>16</sup>

Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket) has also funded several projects which supports foreign-born women's inclusion into the labour market. "Womenisa" was a project which primarily targets women with a foreign background, from a socio-economic vulnerable area around Stockholm. Womenisa aims to recruit unemployed and foreign-born women to the network.<sup>17</sup>

"Trappa upp nationellt" is a project inspired by Yalla Trappan<sup>18</sup>, (also funded by Tillväxtverket). The project aims to increase employment and entrepreneurship among foreign-born women through cooperative entrepreneurship, employment, internships, or work preparation initiatives such as education and study circles.<sup>19</sup> Yalla Trappan project inspired Yalla Rinkeby 2.0 which builds on what has already been established in Rinkeby and on the concept that Yallatrappan in Malmö has built up. It involves engaging women with a foreign background who are outside the labour market in development processes with work-integrating social enterprises and self-developed methods within Yalla as a basis.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, Kompetensslussen which was funded by Tillväxtverket focus on the textile business. Based on the validation methods that exist today, the project aims to develop a coordinated validation model to take advantage of and further develop the skills of newly arrived women. The purpose is to create new, individualized and in-demand training initiatives in professional adult education, which in the long run leads to satisfying the industry with the right skills.

### **Local Initiatives**

The Swedish Public Employment Service and Samordningsförbunden has an initiative called "SamSpråk" is an initiative by in Södertälje, Stockholm. The target group for SamSpråk is foreign-born women searching for a job who need language development. The project combines language training and effort to improve the health condition among the women.<sup>21</sup>

There is also an initiative to match employers with employees which funded by the government. Jobbsprånget matches employers with new arrivals, who have higher education in areas that are relevant for the industry.<sup>22</sup>

"Jämställd Etablering" purpose is to increase newly arrived migrants' opportunities to get a job by matching and to provide individual support from the Swedish Public Employment Service. The project is an activity in the Swedish Public Employment Service's action plan to get more foreign-born women into work or study.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.sll.se/verksamhet/Regional-utveckling/Nyheter/2020/06/78-miljoner-till-projekt-inom-kompetensforsorjning-och-konkurrenskraft/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.womenisa.se/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.yallatrappan.com/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://coompanion.se/coompanion/trappa-upp-nationellt/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://yallarinkeby.se/projektet-yalla-rinkeby-2>

<sup>21</sup> <https://tillvaxtverket.se/download/18.4c1250a116d1bb3a3f01bb69/1568294949888/Fem%20v%C3%A4gar%20till%20arbete%20och%20f%C3%B6retagande%20f%C3%B6r%20utrikes%20f%C3%B6dda%20kvinnor%2020287.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <https://jobbspranget.se/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/om-oss/var-verksamhet/internationellt/eu-fonder/jamstalld-etablering>

## 2. Focus Groups



Two focus group discussions were held through a video call on the 26th of February. One focus group is established with four individuals from the target group and one with the three individuals from the company and vocational training center representatives on the 26th of February. With respect to research questions used within the interviews, the focus group had a discussion, reflecting the below mentioned objectives:

- Training needs of the target group (TG1) in digital skills such as social media skills
- Current gaps in the provision of training on social inclusion and capital building
- Finding the VET (Vocational Education Training) requirements that companies need in terms of their need for workers

## 3. In-depth Interviews

Interviews took place in different days from the 20th of January to the 12th of February 2021, through one-to-one video calls and face-to-face meetings between a member staff of IKF Malmö and the practitioners, vocational center, and company representatives. The purpose of the in-depth interview was to identify the training needs and problems for socially excluded people to build social capital by developing professional skills. Interviews involved a total of 10 experts. 5 of the interviews are conducted with the practitioners who are in the field of working for the social and economic rights of foreign-born women. 2 interviews are conducted with the persons who work as circle leaders in a vocational training center in Malmö. In addition to these, 3 company owners/entrepreneurs are interviewed from the sectors of HR Consultancy, Accounting, and IT.

## FINDINGS

The main findings from this research are as follows:

- **The training should take into consideration the digitalization:** The global pandemic has created enormous impact on the target group as well as native Swedes. Since the vocational training centers had to stop their activities and adjust digitalization, vocational training of foreign-born women became more difficult. Also, the economies are highly impacted in every country including Sweden which led people to lose their jobs. Therefore, due to the shrink of new vacancies, access to labor market by the foreign-born women decreased with the addition of their certain disadvantages and barriers.

Digitalization gained more importance and the women who are not skilled in digital devices are negatively impacted. Not having access to such devices caused their isolation. Women who have trauma background suffered due to isolation even more.

NGOs and vocational training centers who conduct study circles could not engage properly with the target group. Foreign-born women who are learning the Swedish language had harder time to practice their language skills and it caused backlash in their skillset. Eventually, these decreased the opportunity to get a job as well as their social integration process since these activities are usually a way to get out of their own social circles and penetrate the multicultural zone and restore their self-confidence while networking.

Some participants emphasized the importance of networking to get into the labor market. They addressed the difficulties of networking and exchanging experiences through online channels.

- **Language education continues to be the ever-lasting pressing need** for the women who has foreign background. As pointed out above, the quality of the State services on language education must be developed to increase the employment rate of the target group.
- **Leadership Training:** Foreign-born women in Sweden do not necessarily realize their potential on leadership. Even if they realize, the harmful habits of job market do not allow them to hold higher positions. Therefore, there should be more committed efforts to support entrepreneurial women who wants to be leaders in business and other sectors.
- **Transferable Skills:** There should be a training effort for women who has transferable skills and would like to adapt the current employment sphere.
- **Networking Needs:** must be collective effort to create or restore the missing link between the potential employers and the foreign-born women. To make them engage and being a bridge between them has crucial importance since their networking is going to increase target group's involvement in the vocational training and labor market.
- Partners should provide participants with **clear instructions** on:
  - the aim of the project,
  - how will the VICTORUPESI training will impact their career path and social integration,
  - how long the training will be, and what exactly they will study,
  - where the training will take place,
  - in which way their contribution to the training will affect the life of others that are facing the same challenges,
  - how the training was built on their need's assessment.

- **Flexible training is essential** since our target group -foreign-born women- are quite diverse with diverse needs and responsibilities. The level of education, possible trauma background, the speed of learning is very different depending on such differences. Apart from the vocational training which they attend, there can be other factors including the labor division at their home which may require more flexible approach for the target group.
- **From the focus groups and interviews, it can be noted that the participants are keen to be supported to establish their businesses, vocational trainings on entrepreneurship, social media education for women or focusing on women's mental health or language skills.** These projects did not lose their relevancy since there is still demand on them by the potential participants. However, the labor market demands new skills from foreign-born women.

Main highlight of many participants is that the technological requirements are higher and higher of the current era, especially after Covid-19. The industries are getting more and more digitalized and the gender roles in the society, including in the mindset of the target group, do not allow women to enter male-dominated sectors such as information technologies. Inclusion of women in micro-engineering or car industry is a necessity to reach gender equality. It is also stressed that this is a problem needs to be addressed from both sides, because less women are interested in such opportunities or simply, they do not know if they can work in such sectors. There is a perception in women that car industry requires knowing mechanics and physical power or getting hands dirty. However, it is quite the contrary, it requires to be able to control the job digitally. In conclusion, there are many male-dominated sectors that changed the employment profile, but foreign-born women are not necessarily aware of their transferrable skills to work in such sectors.

Vocational training is needed for foreign-born women to identify their transferrable skills. For example, a chemist can work in agricultural sector in Sweden which is a growing sector.

In addition to above-mentioned finding, it is mentioned that the management positions or higher positions are not also quite open to foreign-born women. Training initiatives for women leaders must be carried out, although the deeper problem is that foreign-born women usually do not enter the job market due to their skills in a new country including Sweden. The issue of starting at a suitable level must be tackled and addressed.

There is a big labor gap in the medical sector and especially in elderly care. Most of the participants of the interviews addressed the need of skilled labor in healthcare sector. Due to demographic information of Sweden, it is expected that the labor needs in elderly care sector is going to be in a raising trend. The issue, on the other hand, must be addressed multidimensionally. Hence, vocational training in elderly care would not be enough to be employed, potential workers also must master the Swedish language.

In general, the participants draw attention to the notion of inclusion towards women who have foreign background, who have neurodiversity or who have disabilities. However, inclusion relates to the compatibility to the new work environment. Therefore, training on the Swedish work culture might be also a necessity.

- **Other relevant findings**

1 - **Regarding the Swedish Laws and Policies:** General opinion of the participants on the Swedish legal framework and policies regarding the employment is that the Swedish law is well structured. Right to work and means to work have a good structure and institutions. However, the law does not actively engage the employment needs of foreign-born women, according to the interviewees there is a missing link between the legislation and the actual needs of those women. Therefore, this affects foreign-born women's inclusion into the labor market and social integration.

It is recognized by the participants that there is a certain level of effort from the State Agencies to meet the employment needs in general. However, missing link still exists between the legislation and the professional inclusion. Since the State has limited resources and the capacity, most of the foreign-born women find their path to job market through NGOs and civil society.

It is also emphasized that there is a gap in the policies and practice for foreign-born women's language acquisition and adaptation to the work culture and culture in general. It is agreed by the participants that Sweden is putting an effort to invest in migrants' education in general such as Swedish Language for Immigrants (SFI). For example, SFI is for beginners and they are not efficient for everyone since the courses are quite slow. For the foreign-born women who already gained certain language skills or who are fast learners, there is not any other remedy to learn the language free of charge. They cannot leap to the secondary school since their SFI grade is needed. This decreases the Swedish speaking and their participation in labor market.

Although there is an intention in the law, the implementation of the law does not reflect the need of networking and engaging with the society. Also, it is commented that the laws and the policies such as the ones with Swedish National Employment Agency are not easily understood by the foreign-born women due to bureaucracy and complicated laws and regulations in Sweden. Although it does not reflect the reality, it is assumed that everybody has access to computer and knows how to use it to get into the labor market. All in all, the efficiency of the laws and policies are questioned by the participants.

**2 - Regarding the Funding:** It is observed that most of the participants are only aware of the funding which they have already accessed before. There is a general understanding that Erasmus+ projects and other European Union funds exist as well as Swedish National Agencies' funding opportunities.

Some participants did not see of a benefit of covid-related funding, some others indicated that there was no funding opportunity related to that. However, main highlight of the interviews is the need of having funding for the digitalization. Since the target group lacks the necessary digital tools and the information on how to handle technology, the necessity is sought by the practitioners in the field of vocational training.

Two participants stressed the inadequacy of the current funding system and addressed the need of a change in current economic system of project-based funding. To put it simply, the projects are usually bound with 1-3 years of time limit and their sustainability is at stake if there is no extension of funding. Therefore, there is a possibility that there could be no additional funding even if the project is extremely successful and reached the target. One participant brought up the project of IKF Malmö called Carpe Sofia and BNS. These projects supported the business ideas of the foreign-born women and big amount of the participants established their own businesses and women with entrepreneurial ideas got great benefit out of the project. However, the project had to finish due to fund-cuts. The solution that was introduced by those practitioners to have a 'stable income scheme'. This is a sponsorship-like income generation activity for NGOs. According to the participant, non-profit does not mean that it should all depend totally on project funding, you can still have stable economy through companies, your members and target group. All in all, this would create sustainable growth for the foreign-born women.

**3 - Regarding the National and Local Initiatives:** The question is formulated in a way which aims to identify the perception of the practitioners, vocational training center representatives and potential employers on the local and national initiatives to support foreign-born women. The goal was to understand if the manifestation of the local and national initiatives in the sense of their cooperation.

The participants have different opinions on how concerted the initiatives are. However, the common finding is that although there are certain agencies which are trying to cooperate. However,



the effort usually remains ineffective. For example, there are partnerships among NGOs in certain projects. But also, NGOs rapidly introduce new projects and there is not necessarily a good coordination among them. The National Agencies fund the local initiatives which the target and the subject of the projects duplicate.

One interviewee pointed out the mutual network and certain collaboration of the NGOs and Agencies who work in the vocational training of the migrants since there are many different activities in different institutions. Human resources of these projects are not isolated, even if foreign-born women are isolated. For example, IKF cooperates with municipalities of Malmö and Stockholm.

Vocational Centre's representatives, however, have more optimistic view about the level of sufficiency and the concerted effort. They have emphasized that the vocational training centers have connections and cooperation with the governmental authorities such as social services of State-run kindergarten. Although the workers of vocational centers were quite sceptical on the fact that the cooperation might be depending on the occupant of the 'seat'.

All in all, the common opinion of the participants that there is not properly concerted effort to ensure the foreign-born women's access to labor market.

#### **4 - Challenges for the Target Group**

The common issue raised by all the participants is 'discrimination'. According to the participants, not having a Swedish name on the ID or CV is a challenge to be invited to job interviews. There are also issues with accents, a different appearance, skin color and attitude. Because it is extremely difficult to integrate into Swedish job market without network, it is nearly impossible for a foreign-born woman to get a job without network and recommendation of someone.

Language barrier is also one of the biggest challenges in accessing jobs even if the foreign-born woman applies for an English-speaking position. The Swedish work culture requires being able to mingle in Swedish during the coffee breaks as part of the social integration. The professionals who work with foreigners are also facing problems with language. It is harder to communicate with vocational training providers for the foreign-born women.

Other differences of the Swedish work culture need to be learnt as well. For example, interviews are one of the first steps of accessing the jobs and the expected employee behavior during the interviews may vary from a country to another. Also, it may not be welcomed to have spontaneous meetings with the manager in Sweden whereas booking time is preferred.

Mental health of the foreign-born women is another factor according to the number participants of our interviews. Failure to find a job in the long run affects women's self-confidence and mental health. These mental health issues may affect learning new skills and the language. Also, some foreign-born women who came to Sweden are traumatized due to war or other disasters which they left behind. For the practitioners in vocational training centers, they need to be aware of the target group's daily struggles and be considerate about trauma background.

There is also a problem of informal segregation. Foreign-born women do not live in the same neighborhoods with the locals, their children do not go to the same schools, etc. Integration does not happen with only vocational training. Segregation does not help foreign-born women to have the network to access to the job market.

Networking opportunities are hugely impacted by the global pandemic. There used to be job fairs in the past, online events are not serving the purpose of networking and this is an issue to access to vocational trainings and jobs.

Another challenge which was brought up by the interviewees is that the human resources capacity of the Swedish National Employment Agency (Arbetsförmedlingen). Foreign-born women do



not get tailored services for their own vocational training needs and coaching services from Arbetsförmedlingen. The automatized services of Arbetsförmedlingen does not seem to create the expected result on vocational training needs due to the participants.

Arbetsförmedlingen and other national agencies' language is also a problem for foreign-born women. Although the rules and the regulations are published in their websites, it is challenging for a person who has foreign background to understand them. That makes it harder to adapt and keep being engaged with the employment scheme.

The current system is criticized with its lack of cooperation and concerted efforts. The practitioners and the target group should have open dialogue channels, so that the training needs are discovered in a more democratic ways since the status does not consult foreign-born women on what they wish for their career.

## How are we going to use these findings?

When developing the training materials, the partners will ensure that the content is **clear and easy to understand**, consisted of all the relevant information needed to use **different social media platforms**, and also included information on **safety and security** when using the platforms. With regards to language barriers, all partners **translated the materials into English, Swedish, Italian, Serbian, Slovenian, Romanian and Spanish** to aid the training in the different countries.

When training starts, each partner organization should consider ensuring **that flexible training options are given** to suit those involved, and the **online learning platform** will also be used to supplement the training, in case any information needed reiterating.

### Other ways of using the findings

The findings of this research, that collected valuable data on the current situation of the foreign-born women, will also be used as a reference document for the organization and other local actors involved in the process of the social integration of our target group. It will also be displayed on the organization website so it can serve not only locally but internationally as well.

## The importance of diversity management!

VICTORUPESI consortium consist out of very divers partners serving very diverse beneficiaries. This represents a micro mirror of the societies each of our beneficiaries are living in and is really important to build the ground for holistic approaches.

Reasons for having holistic approaches in Sweden:

- **Social awareness aspect:** The job market is highly dominated with the stigma against foreign-born individuals. There are deeply rooted habits and discriminatory behaviors among the employers to be hesitant to hire foreign-born women even if they are qualified. Also, vocational training centers' practices proved that the women with no digital skills in today's digital world are behind others and they are the most isolated. As per the level of intersectional discrimination is high, it is important to raise awareness within the potential employers and other society members as much as possible on gender equality and racial discrimination. It is crucial to understand that the good quality of the inclusion paths for the target group by everyone since their inclusion and education would only enhance the whole community's wellbeing.
- **Legal aspect:** Even if there are policies and laws in place, the status of foreign-born women's training needs, language education and access to labor market proved the existing framework is not sufficient for diversified target group. Flexible methods must be developed and introduced with the consideration of different groups of foreign-born people based on different education levels and abilities.

- **Administrativ Aspect:** State agencies lack sufficient effort to enhance the standards of its services to effectively respond the needs of both the labor market and foreign-born women. In specific, Swedish National Employment Agency should be encouraged to develop more tailored services based on different individuals' needs and level of growth as the current standardized services are not inclusively engaging with everyone. In addition, Swedish language teaching scheme should be updated in a way which every individual can find a suitable learning model since it does not consider the abilities or disabilities of different individuals. Therefore, all relevant national agencies are in need of updating their policies to more inclusive ones for foreign-born women.

## The importance of digital skills!

The world is changing significantly, hence the need to keep up to date with technology. With technology advancing at an incredible speed, it is important that we are not lagging behind these changes.

Reasons for having good digital skills in Sweden:

- Many employers now require you to have some basic computer skills, such as being able to use certain applications and software to get a job, write CVs and being able to attach CVs to emails.
- The emerging need of improving the digital skills must be focused for adjusting to the new more digitalized world for the purpose of attending online classes or working from home, especially after the pandemic.
- New trends in the job market must be followed and women must be trained on such trends, for example creating a video presentation instead of a personal letter.
- Also, networking skills during the digitalization is another aspect that the target group would need to acquire.
- It is important to know the digital limits to have healthy digital habits.
- To help you showcase your **personal brand** online. This enables employers to explore your digital competences.
- Whether you are an employer or an employee, businesses use digital skills to **promote and market** their brand, service and/or ethos
- Being digitally active can also increase your **networks**. This could be for social purposes or employment seeking purposes.

## The overviews of the political context in each of the partners countries

Sweden, a democratic and hereditary monarchy State, is ranked first in terms of political freedom<sup>24</sup>, the citizens enjoy larger freedom and human rights. Also, Sweden has a feminist government with a specific ministry for gender equality. The party of Social Democrats is the oldest party and currently ruling party which has been in power for the last century with a few election cycle exceptions. Social Democrats share the coalition with the Green Party.

It is important to note that, since our target group is foreign-born women, discrimination and stigma against the foreign-born persons have growing resonance in the society. Therefore, in the last election in 2018, Social Democrats lost 13 seats against Sweden Democrats who became the third largest party. Sweden Democrats campaigned that “cultural clashes with visibly observant Muslims, and reports of growing crime—creating a recruitment mechanism for disaffected Swedes”.<sup>25</sup> Although

<sup>24</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-rise-of-sweden-democrats-and-the-end-of-swedish-exceptionalism/>

Sweden welcomed asylum seekers in the last decades, the number of refugee records hit high after 2015 with 162,877 applications for asylum, generally from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This makes almost 1.6 percent of Sweden's population of 10 million. According to the poll concluded by Ipsos in 2018, the proportion of Swedes who think immigration was bad for the country grew from 13 to 31 percent since 2015.<sup>26</sup>

Foreign-born women have intersecting and overlapping social identities which has negative impact on their education, vocational training and finally their access to labor market. Apart from the male dominance in certain sectors such as IT or management positions, there is also a big skepticism among the employers to include foreigners into their establishments. As a result, women who has foreign-born background suffers from this discrimination the most. Furthermore, foreign-born women become even less included, if they have other features for example disability, neurodiversity, or religious differences.<sup>27</sup>

According to different sources and statistics, unemployment rate in Sweden is higher in foreign-born individuals compared to the individuals born in Sweden. Unemployment is higher among foreign-born women in comparison to the foreign-born men. To illustrate better, 52 percent of foreign-born women in Sweden have a job (20-29 age group), whereas 67 percent of foreign-born men are employed. This employment rate goes up 79 percent for Swedish-born men.<sup>28</sup>

### **The overviews of the funding of vocational education in each of the partners countries**

Vocational education funding in Sweden is divided in sections such as adult education and training providers with the formal and non-formal education and training. Various State Agencies fund different activities along with the municipalities. In addition to the national funding agencies, European Union, and Erasmus+ has number of available funds to support access to job market. In Sweden, mainly municipalities provide adult education, and rarely regional councils. Municipalities may transfer some of the tasks to external education and training providers, such as private education companies and folk high schools.

Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket) funds various private initiatives which have their own area of focus. For example, there are vocational training centers focusing on only certain areas such as Komptensslussen is a fast track to the Swedish textile industry. Their efforts increase and broaden the textile-related competence. Hermods is another company which gets funding by number of municipalities and offers industry-leading training that leads to jobs such as training in Construction and Civil Engineering, Metal Workers, Home Services, Janitors, Remediation, Service and Sales, Service Host in healthcare and Validation of construction and civil engineering.

### **The overviews of the local companies and industries available to hire our beneficiaries in each of the partners countries**

Sweden has several industries which may be interest of our target group. Motor vehicles, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, industrial machines, precision equipment, chemical goods,

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.thelocal.se/20180421/six-out-of-ten-voters-in-sweden-want-fewer-refugees-poll/>

<sup>27</sup> Carbado, D., Crenshaw, K., Mays, V., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 303-312. doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000349

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/labour-market/labour-force-surveys/labour-force-surveys-lfs/pong/statistical-news/labour-force-surveys-lfs-3rd-quarter-2020/>

home goods and appliances, forestry, iron, and steel are main industries exist in Sweden. Apart from the traditional agricultural sector, engineering, mine, steel, and pulp industries are growing to be competitive internationally.

Largest and famous Swedish companies are Ikea, Volvo, Ericsson, Vattenfall, Skanska, Hennes & Mauritz, Electrolux, Volvo Personvagnar, Preem, TeliaSonera, Sandvik, ICA, Atlas Copco, Nordea, Svenska Cellulosa Aktiebolaget, Scania, Securitas, Nordstjernan, SKF, ABB Norden Holding, and Sony Mobile Communications AB.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from the private companies, public sector in Sweden needs more employees. Especially, the need for medical staff, including nursing assistants and care workers, is brought up by many of the participants of our focus group discussions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy\\_of\\_Sweden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Sweden)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thelocal.se/20200513/sweden-pledges-to-give-up-to-10000-care-workers-permanent-jobs/>