

BET ON A WOMAN



GUIDELINES FOR OUTREACH AND TRAINING OF YOUNG WOMEN FROM DISADVANTAGED GROUPS



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Bet on a Woman! is a multi-phase Erasmus+ project designed to address the specific needs of **young women from disadvantaged groups**, particularly those at risk of exclusion due to economic, geographical, and social barriers. The initiative combines **local and international activities**, research, youth worker training, and direct work with young women to create inclusive, empowering learning environments that foster **leadership, entrepreneurship, and personal development**.

The project aims to increase young women's access to opportunities, confidence, and independence by **strengthening their skills and empowering them** to take an active role in their communities and careers. Women, especially those from rural or vulnerable backgrounds, continue to face **obstacles** such as **gender inequality, economic dependency, and lack of self-confidence**. This project responds to those challenges through practical education, legal awareness, and tailored motivation strategies.

Implemented by a **partnership** of organisations from **Spain, Portugal, Türkiye, and Poland**, Bet on a Woman! brings together a wide range of expertise and grassroots experience. The project also focuses on **training educators and youth workers** by providing them with innovative methodologies and tools to better support young women in their personal and professional growth.



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OUR PARTNERS



Youth Human Impact

Poland
**Youth Human
Impact Association**



Spain
EuroMuévete



**Türkiye
Alexandretta
Youth Association**



Portugal
Associação Inspira!



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Youth Human Impact Association



Youth Human Impact

Youth Human Impact Association is an organization that gives young people creative opportunities for self-education and personal development in order to find a passion for acting. They strive to arouse among their members the entrepreneurial attitude and sense of initiative. They organize educational projects both in Poland and abroad. They work in an unconventional way and focus on non-formal education. Youth Human Impact Association places a strong emphasis on educating youth in its activities. They build and give opportunities to gain knowledge and skills that are not offered in the traditional school system. They give them the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills that will be used by them in everyday life: private and professional. In this way, they create the opportunity to enter the job market more easily. They always involve young people in their activities while struggling with various obstacles: geographical, economic, social.

EuroMuévete Association

EuroMuévete is a non-governmental organisation located in Málaga, Spain, founded in 2018 by a group of young people and youth workers from Málaga, who realised that the youth in their local community needs the support to develop their personal and professional skills in order to have a better chance in the labour market, as well as offer them career guidance. Their activities give them the opportunity to combine their willingness to learn, and develop their soft skills especially in an intercultural background. Their methods of education are using non-formal and informal approaches. Their target group is made up of young people with fewer opportunities, especially the unemployed ones between 13 to 30 years old and adults from the region of Malaga and especially the rural areas (Cuevas Bajas, Benalmádena, Mijas, Rincón de la Victoria). They are offering education and training, through personal development, cultural and artistic activities based on European values.



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Youth Human Impact

Alexandretta Youth Association



Alexandretta Youth Association (AYA) is an innovative youth-led organization founded in 2019 by a passionate group of university students and recent graduates. Committed to breaking down social and physical barriers, AYA champions the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goals for young people facing fewer opportunities. Their mission is rooted in promoting equality, accessibility, and opportunities for ALL youth. Specializing in Erasmus+ programs and youth exchanges, AYA designs and implements projects to empower and inspire young citizens locally and internationally. Their dedicated volunteers focus on key areas including human rights, women's empowerment, mobility for marginalized groups, environmental rights, and peer collaboration. Through advocacy, capacity building, and strategic partnerships, AYA strives to foster youth solidarity, cultural exchange, and European-added values.

Inspira Youth & Environment

Associação Inspira! is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2017 in Chaves, a small city in the northern hills of Portugal, one of the most rural, isolated and disadvantaged areas of the country.

They focus on two main areas of work: youth opportunity and environmental intervention, aiming at creating a more open, educated, participative and developed local community, at involving young people in the local decisions, in shaping the creation of the future of this region and in protecting and recovering the local nature and their ecological patrimony.

For that they lead frequent actions and diverse local and international programs for volunteering, youth participation, community development, environmental education, intervention actions, civic and democratic education, media literacy, youth entrepreneurship and employment, gender equality and social education.



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ABOUT THE GUIDE

The purpose of this guide is to support youth workers, educators, NGOs and institutions in better understanding the needs, experiences, and realities of young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those at risk of exclusion due to social, economic, or geographical factors.

By sharing practical tools, real-life examples, and experience-based recommendations, the guide seeks to help professionals reach, connect with, and empower these young women more effectively. Rather than offering purely theoretical models, it focuses on how to engage with them in a meaningful and inclusive way, with an emphasis on motivation, confidence-building, and participatory learning.

This guide also serves as a bridge between research, practice, and lived experience, combining quantitative data and qualitative insights to highlight what truly works in the field of outreach and training.

Objectives of this guide:

- 1 To provide a clear overview of the current situation of young women from disadvantaged backgrounds in the partner countries.
- 2 To encourage youth workers and organisations to reflect on their practices, and to better adapt their programs to reach and support this target group.
- 3 To contribute to greater awareness and understanding of the systemic barriers these women face and how to actively dismantle them through education and empowerment.



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METHODOLOGY

The development of this guide followed a **multi-layered methodology** combining **research, fieldwork, and experiential learning**. Each partner country carried out a **national survey** involving over 100 young women aged 15–30, to better understand their challenges, motivations, and views on leadership and entrepreneurship. These surveys provided a solid **quantitative** foundation for the guide.

In addition, an **international training course** brought together youth workers and educators to co-create and test tools and strategies. This training followed a holistic approach using **non-formal education methods**. Activities included role-playing, simulations, workshops, and group discussions, methods chosen not only for their accessibility, but for their ability to create safe spaces and promote authentic engagement.

Following the training, each country also conducted **5 in-depth interviews** with young women from disadvantaged groups, offering valuable **qualitative insights** and giving voice to lived experiences.

Non-formal education has been a central pillar throughout the project, not only as a tool for empowerment, but as a philosophy of learning based on participation, dialogue, emotional safety, and self-reflection. This guide itself is the result of that process, a product of collective learning, co-creation, and cross-border collaboration.



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TARGET AUDIENCE

This guide is intended for anyone working directly or indirectly with young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in the context of empowerment, training, and social inclusion. Whether you're designing a workshop, running a project, creating a policy, or simply trying to connect with young women in your community, this guide is for you. It can be especially useful for:

01

Youth workers

Youth workers who want to strengthen their approach and adapt their activities to better support young women at risk of exclusion.

02

Educators and trainers

Educators and trainers seeking to create more inclusive, practical, and motivating learning environments.

03

NGOs

NGOs and grassroots organisations that want to better understand the challenges and aspirations of this target group.

04

Institutions and decision-makers

Institutions and decision-makers designing or funding policies and programs aimed at gender equality, youth development, or community empowerment.



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SPAIN



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Country Snapshot

In Spain, young women from disadvantaged backgrounds face a variety of social, economic, and geographical barriers that limit their access to education, employment, and personal development opportunities. These barriers are especially pronounced among women living in rural areas, migrant women, and those from low-income households.

According to data from Spain's National Statistics Institute (INE), the **youth unemployment rate for women under 25** remains high, fluctuating between **28% and 32% in recent years**, with even higher figures in rural or economically depressed regions¹. In addition, more than **22% of young women** are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2023)².

One of the key findings from the national survey carried out within the Bet on a Woman! project, which included over 100 respondents aged 15 to 30, is the **lack of access to practical, accessible information about training and support opportunities**. Over 60% of participants reported difficulties in finding relevant resources to improve their skills or access entrepreneurship programmes.

Mental health also emerged as a major concern. A significant number of respondents expressed feelings of **isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem**, particularly among migrant women and those living in smaller towns, where support networks and inclusive spaces are scarce.

The intersection of **gender, geography, and socio-economic background** continues to shape and often limit the choices available to young women in Spain. This context highlights the importance of designing outreach and training strategies that are inclusive, accessible, and grounded in the lived realities of the young women they aim to support.

1. INE – Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2023). Encuesta de Población Activa (EPA), Datos de desempleo juvenil por sexo y edad.

2. Eurostat (2023). People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex – EU-SILC survey.



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

According to the national research carried out by **EuroMuévete** in Spain, based on the responses of over 100 young women aged between **15 and 30**, the most effective practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills are those that place young women at the centre—as **protagonists of their own growth process**, rather than passive recipients of information. The participants emphasised the importance of having access to **safe, inclusive and emotionally supportive spaces** where they can develop not only professional skills, but also confidence, motivation and self-awareness.

One of the most frequently mentioned good practices involved the use of **creative and expressive methodologies** such as artistic workshops, storytelling, dance, and music. These spaces allow young women to connect with their identity, values, and personal strengths, while at the same time building key soft skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Unlike traditional classroom settings, non-formal environments create **emotional safety and trust**, which are essential for young women—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—to fully engage and grow.

Participants also highlighted the transformative impact of **international mobility opportunities**, such as Erasmus+ exchanges or intercultural projects. For many, this was the first time they travelled, collaborated with peers from different countries, or discovered new professional and personal pathways. These experiences were described as empowering, horizon-expanding, and key to increasing their sense of agency.

Another recurring element was the value of **mentorship**, especially from women who have faced similar challenges. Mentors who listen, validate, and support without judgment were described as “life-changing.” Young women are not only looking for training; they are looking for **people who believe in them**.

In conclusion, the most effective practices are those that combine **skill-building with emotional empowerment, cultural exposure, and genuine connection**. Programs that respect each participant’s rhythm, adapt to their realities, and prioritise personal development alongside professional goals were rated as the most impactful by the young women surveyed.



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

According to organisations and decision-makers in Spain, the most effective practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women are those that offer **accessible, practical, and sustainable support**, particularly for women from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds. Rather than isolated workshops, what proves most impactful are **structured, long-term initiatives** that combine funding access, mentoring, and gender-sensitive training.

A national model often cited is the **PAEM programme** (Programa de Apoyo Empresarial a las Mujeres), promoted by the **Spanish Chamber of Commerce** and co-financed by the **European Social Fund**. Since its launch, PAEM has supported over **75,000 women** with tailored advice, digital tools, and financial access for business development¹. Similarly, **Fundación Mujeres** offers programmes that combine **entrepreneurship education with gender-conscious mentoring**, reinforcing the emotional and social dimensions of empowerment.

Organisations also underline the importance of tackling **gender stereotypes** and building **self-confidence** from the very beginning. The presence of visible female role models, peer learning opportunities, and support networks are key components in effective leadership pathways.

At the institutional level, the **Strategic Plan for Equal Opportunities (PEIO) 2022-2025** by the **Spanish Ministry of Equality** includes targeted actions to promote economic autonomy and entrepreneurship for women, particularly in rural or vulnerable contexts². Across all levels, organisations agree that good practices must be **context-aware, inclusive, and co-created** with the women they aim to support.

1. Cámara de Comercio de España. (2023). Programa de Apoyo Empresarial a las Mujeres (PAEM).

2. Ministerio de Igualdad. (2022). Plan Estratégico de Igualdad de Oportunidades entre Mujeres y Hombres 2022-2025 (PEIO).



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

From the perspective of young people in Spain, one of the most significant barriers to developing leadership and entrepreneurial skills is the **lack of accessible, clear, and visible information** about existing programs and opportunities. Many young women report that they often hear about initiatives too late—or not at all—due to ineffective communication and outreach strategies by institutions. This issue is particularly acute in **rural areas**, where internet access is limited, and word-of-mouth is still the main source of information. As a result, many young women feel excluded from opportunities before they even have the chance to participate.

Another widespread concern is that many training programmes are perceived as **too formal, abstract, or disconnected** from their lived realities. Initiatives that require long-term commitment or rigid schedules often clash with the realities of young women who are juggling caregiving responsibilities, precarious jobs, or academic demands. Without flexibility in timing, transportation support, or financial aid, participation becomes unfeasible for many of them. In addition, **emotional wellbeing and mental health** are rarely addressed, even though they are essential for real empowerment.

Participants also pointed to the **scarcity of relatable female role models and mentors**. Without visible examples of successful women in leadership or entrepreneurship—especially from similar backgrounds—it becomes more difficult for young women to imagine themselves in those roles. This absence reinforces feelings of inadequacy and isolation, particularly in environments where ambition in women is still viewed with suspicion or considered socially inappropriate.

Overall, the young women consulted in the national research believe that many existing initiatives, while well-intentioned, are not **truly inclusive—neither in format nor in tone**. For programs to be effective, they must be designed with empathy, adaptability, and direct input from the young women they aim to support.



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

From the point of view of organisations and decision-makers in Spain, a key barrier to fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women is the **lack of tailored, long-term support mechanisms** that respond to their specific socioeconomic realities. According to the **European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)**, many national and regional programs fail to take into account the multiple layers of disadvantage (gender, age, geography, socio-economic status), leading to a one-size-fits-all approach that does not work in practice¹.

In Spain, bureaucratic barriers, such as **complicated application procedures and limited access to funding** for first-time entrepreneurs, are often cited as structural obstacles, especially for women who are unemployed or without formal qualifications. As **Fundación COTEC** points out in its report on inclusive entrepreneurship, **public initiatives tend to be centralised in urban areas, leaving rural regions under-supported**². This geographical imbalance contributes to a major gap in access to opportunities, with **young women in rural zones facing double exclusion: by gender and by territory**.

Moreover, organisations acknowledge that many training programs **lack continuity or follow-up**, and that entrepreneurship education is often too theoretical, with little focus on real-life skills such as **networking, self-confidence, or emotional resilience**. Despite policy frameworks like **Spain's Plan Estratégico para la Igualdad de Oportunidades (PEIO 2022–2025)**, implementation often falls short due to **limited collaboration between institutions and grassroots initiatives**. In fact, several stakeholders agree that grassroots organisations are underutilised, even though they are key to reaching women in vulnerable situations and building trust within communities.

Without stronger coordination between policy, practice, and the lived experiences of young women, many well-intentioned programs continue to reproduce exclusion rather than overcome it.

1. European Institute for Gender Equality (2022). Gender Equality Index – Country Profile: Spain. EIGE.

2. Fundación COTEC (2020). *El emprendimiento inclusivo en España*. Madrid: COTEC para la Innovación.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

According to young people in Spain, one of the most pressing challenges in fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women is the **lack of confidence and self-belief**, especially among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Growing up without seeing relatable female role models in positions of power or independence makes it difficult for many to visualise themselves as leaders or entrepreneurs. This contributes to **low self-esteem, fear of failure**, and the idea that success is only for others with better connections or more resources.

Another recurring concern is the **disconnect between traditional education and real-life skills**. Young women feel that school often fails to teach them essential abilities like communication, public speaking, project development, or financial planning. Many reported that they had never been exposed to entrepreneurship as a real, attainable path, and lacked the tools to turn ideas into action.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing also emerged as core topics. Participants linked their capacity to lead or create with their mental state, self-esteem, and the need for safe spaces to grow personally. Anxiety, comparison, and emotional pressure often go unaddressed in training spaces that focus solely on productivity or output.

Lastly, **economic insecurity** was described as a major barrier. Without access to financial support or awareness of funding opportunities, entrepreneurship is seen as something **only accessible to privileged groups**. Participants stressed the need for programs that combine practical tools with basic support structures to make leadership and entrepreneurship truly inclusive.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

From the perspective of organisations and decision-makers in Spain, one of the most critical challenges in fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women is ensuring **sustained, long-term engagement**, rather than short-term participation. Many programmes are designed as isolated interventions, lacking the continuity and follow-up needed to accompany young women throughout their development. As a result, participants often disengage or fail to reach their full potential, especially when practical and emotional needs are not addressed over time.

Another major issue is the **limited accessibility of training and support** for women in rural or economically vulnerable settings. Barriers such as **unstable internet access, poor transportation, and unpaid care work** frequently prevent their participation. Organisations stress the importance of adapting content and delivery formats to these realities, and of bringing opportunities closer to where women live and work.

There is also a growing recognition that entrepreneurship education should include not only technical or business skills, but also **personal development, emotional intelligence, and a leadership mindset**. However, current programmes often underdeliver in these areas. **Gender-sensitive mentoring, female role models**, and the promotion of soft skills like communication and self-confidence are essential, yet often missing components.

In addition, organisations point to the persistent influence of **social and cultural stereotypes**, which discourage young women—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—from seeing themselves as leaders or entrepreneurs. These norms limit ambition and reinforce exclusion. Addressing such structural barriers is seen as **essential for building an inclusive and empowering ecosystem**.

Finally, many organisations call for stronger **intersectoral cooperation**, involving schools, NGOs, institutions and the private sector, to ensure more coherent, accessible and impactful support systems for young women¹.

1. Fundación Mujeres. (2023). La brecha de género en el emprendimiento: Obstáculos y propuestas.



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STORIES & VOICES

The interviews conducted with five young women in Spain: Daniela, Diana, Laura, Yudith, and María del Mar, reveal diverse experiences shaped by structural exclusion, symbolic participation, and lack of meaningful follow-up.

Coming from migrant backgrounds, low-income households, and rural areas, these women expressed a strong desire for growth and personal development, but also highlighted significant emotional, logistical, and systemic barriers limiting their access to leadership, education, and entrepreneurship opportunities.



Daniela Pavón
24 years old
Immigrant



Laura Martín
19 years old
Low income



Diana de la Cruz
25 years old
Immigrant



Yudith García
17 years old
Low income



María Rico
26 years old
Rural areas



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Key Insights

- **Symbolic inclusion with no real voice:** Several women reported being included in activities where their role felt tokenistic—present for the sake of “diversity,” but not truly heard or engaged in decision-making.
- **Lack of continuity and follow-up:** Many initiatives focus heavily on initial motivation or ideation phases, but fail to support participants in the long term, especially when it comes to implementing ideas or sustaining involvement.
- **Discrimination and social stigma:** Age, gender, migrant status, and rural background remain sources of exclusion. Some felt discredited in academic or institutional spaces simply for being young women with different perspectives.
- **Emotional weight of migration and isolation:** The two migrant participants spoke about the deep emotional toll of cultural disconnection, loneliness, and lack of support systems, all of which impact their confidence and ability to move forward.
- **Self-driven learning as resistance:** Faced with institutional inaction, many of these women actively seek online courses, volunteering opportunities, and community spaces to grow—but often do so with emotional fatigue and limited resources.
- **Disconnected systems:** A clear need emerged for stronger coordination between NGOs, schools, and community services—especially to reach girls during key transition periods (e.g., finishing school, entering the job market), when many drop out of support networks.



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Recommendations for NGOs and Policy Makers



- **Avoid symbolic participation:** Involving young women means more than visibility—it means real inclusion, shared ownership, and power in the process.
- **Provide long-term support:** Go beyond the initial workshop. Follow-up, emotional support, and stable structures are essential to maintaining engagement and building trust.
- **Include emotional wellbeing as a core element:** Mental health support is not an add-on—it's foundational to empowerment and leadership development, particularly for women in vulnerable situations.
- **Offer accessible and relevant training:** Programs must adapt to young women's realities (limited time, transport, or internet access) and prioritise practical, transformative, and confidence-building learning.
- **Strengthen community and educational partnerships:** Collaboration with schools, guidance counsellors, and local spaces is vital to reaching more girls and preventing disconnection from support systems.
- **Listen, adapt, and co-create:** These interviews show that active listening, participatory design, and respect for each woman's context create safer, more empowering environments for real change.



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Country Snapshot

In Türkiye, young women continue to face systemic social, cultural, and economic barriers that hinder their access to leadership and entrepreneurship opportunities. While the country has made progress in gender equality policy frameworks, daily realities show persistent inequalities—especially for women from rural areas, marginalised communities, or male-dominated sectors.

According to TÜİK (Turkish Statistical Institute), the youth unemployment rate for women aged 15–24 was 32.2% in 2023, significantly higher than the national average. Additionally, the female labor force participation rate remains below 35%, with notable disparities between urban and rural areas¹. Gender-based stereotypes, traditional roles, and limited access to financial and digital resources continue to reinforce these gaps.

The research carried out as part of the Bet on a Woman! project in Türkiye confirms these challenges. Despite the existence of national and international support programmes, many young women still report lack of confidence, limited access to mentorship, and social stigma related to their career or entrepreneurial ambitions.

Moreover, digital exclusion and geographical inequality are major factors: in rural regions, many women lack access to stable internet, technology, or quality training, which keeps them further from opportunity. Work-life imbalance and concerns about how motherhood might affect their careers also appear consistently.

To effectively support young women from disadvantaged backgrounds in Türkiye, strategies must be gender-sensitive, locally adapted, and grounded in real social and economic contexts, not just institutional frameworks.

1. Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK). (2023). Labour Force Statistics 2023 – Women and Youth Employment.



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

Several civil society organizations in Türkiye play a vital role in empowering young women through various initiatives and campaigns. For example, the Association for Supporting Women Candidates (KADER) organizes training programs and advocacy efforts to increase women's political participation and promote their involvement in decision-making processes. Similarly, the Federation of Turkish Women's Associations (TKDF) defends women's rights and focuses on addressing issues such as gender-based violence, equal access to education, and employment opportunities.

In addition to these larger organizations, community-level initiatives like the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation (Mor Çatı) offer critical support services such as shelter, psychological aid, and legal counseling for women exposed to violence. Beyond direct services, they also implement awareness-raising campaigns to foster social change. The Women's Labor and Employment Initiative (KEİG) concentrates on increasing women's workforce participation by facilitating access to vocational training, capacity-building workshops, and policy dialogues that promote economic independence.

Another notable initiative is the Kız Başına platform, a youth-led community that uses creative online campaigns and social media to advocate for women's rights, gender equality, and animal welfare. It reaches a wide audience and provides a digital space where young women can express themselves freely, access empowering content, and engage in social activism.

These organizations and grassroots movements demonstrate good practices by creating inclusive spaces, providing tangible support, and promoting long-term empowerment through both offline and online engagement strategies.

1. KADER – Association for Supporting Women Candidates: <https://www.kader.org.tr>
2. Turkish Women's Associations Federation (TKDF): <https://www.tkdf.org.tr>
3. Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation (Mor Çatı): <https://www.morcati.org.tr>
4. Women's Labor and Employment Initiative (KEİG): <https://www.keig.org>
5. Kız Başına Initiative: <https://www.kizbasina.com>



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

According to various decision-makers and organizations, fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy support, mentorship, and access to funding. For instance, the Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Services (Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı) has launched national programs aimed at empowering young women, particularly in rural areas, by providing access to education, healthcare, and professional development opportunities. These programs focus on bridging the gap in gender disparities and ensuring that young women are well-equipped to participate in the labor market and leadership positions.

In addition, international organizations such as UN Women and the European Union have been instrumental in supporting projects that provide young women with the necessary skills and resources to succeed. UN Women's "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment" program, for example, provides training in digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and leadership to help young women build their own businesses and become active participants in their communities. The EU's Erasmus+ program, particularly its "Youth" strand, supports the development of leadership skills through cross-border youth exchanges, training courses, and local projects that encourage collaboration and entrepreneurship among young women.

At the local level, many municipalities and local governments are also recognizing the need to foster a more inclusive environment for young women. Local initiatives, such as the Women's Entrepreneurship Program by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, offer mentorship, workshops, and networking opportunities to help young women launch their own businesses. These programs often collaborate with NGOs and private sector organizations to provide a holistic support system that includes access to finance, business incubation, and guidance from experienced entrepreneurs.

Such efforts emphasize the importance of both public and private sector cooperation in creating sustainable opportunities for young women, promoting gender equality, and ensuring long-term empowerment.

6. Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Services (Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığı): <https://www.aile.gov.tr>
7. UN Women – Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: <https://www.unwomen.org>
8. Erasmus+ Youth Program: <https://www.erasmusplus.org>
9. Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality – Women's Entrepreneurship Program: <https://www.ibb.istanbul>



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

Despite the efforts made by civil society organizations and policymakers, young women still face significant barriers and challenges when it comes to developing leadership and entrepreneurial skills. These obstacles are often rooted in deeply entrenched gender norms, societal expectations, and a lack of access to key resources such as education and financial support. Many young women report that traditional gender roles, which often prioritize domestic responsibilities over career aspirations, limit their ability to pursue professional and entrepreneurial goals.

Additionally, limited access to education and training opportunities in certain regions of Türkiye, particularly rural areas, creates a significant barrier for young women to develop the necessary skills for entrepreneurship. The geographical divide between urban and rural areas often results in unequal access to vocational training, mentorship programs, and business networks, which are essential for entrepreneurial success. A lack of digital literacy is another challenge, as young women in rural areas often lack access to the technological tools and knowledge needed to thrive in the digital economy.

Furthermore, financial barriers are a key challenge, with many young women struggling to access funding or start-up capital for their entrepreneurial ventures. This issue is compounded by gender biases in the business world, where women are less likely to receive loans or investment compared to their male counterparts. According to a report by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), women entrepreneurs in Türkiye face higher obstacles in accessing finance, which limits their ability to scale their businesses.

These barriers highlight the need for comprehensive solutions that not only focus on providing skills and training but also address the systemic issues that young women face in their journey towards entrepreneurship and leadership.

10. Gender Roles and Their Impact on Women's Careers: <https://www.gender.org.tr>
11. Digital Literacy and Rural Women: <https://www.researchgate.net>
12. Gender Bias in Business Funding: <https://www.weforum.org>
13. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) – Women Entrepreneurs in Türkiye: <https://www.gemconsortium.org>



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

Organisations and policymakers in Türkiye have recognized the importance of providing support systems and resources to help young women develop leadership and entrepreneurial skills. Several key initiatives and programs are specifically designed to address the barriers identified in the previous section. These include mentorship schemes, vocational training programs, and financial support mechanisms aimed at empowering young women in their professional journeys.

For instance, the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Türkiye(KAĞİDER) plays a crucial role in offering mentorship programs for young women entrepreneurs. KAGİDER's initiatives provide guidance, business development support, and access to networks that can help women scale their businesses and succeed in competitive markets.

The Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) has launched several programs to increase the employability of young women by offering training in areas such as digital skills, leadership, and entrepreneurship. These programs aim to bridge the skill gap, especially in the areas of technology and business management, and provide young women with the tools needed to start their own ventures or take on leadership roles in existing organizations.

Additionally, many banks and financial institutions have started offering tailored financial products for women entrepreneurs. For example, Türkiye İş Bankası has a Women Entrepreneurs Support Program that provides loans with favorable terms to female entrepreneurs, enabling them to access the capital necessary for starting or expanding their businesses.

International organizations also play an important role in supporting young women's entrepreneurial development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for example, has implemented programs that provide young women with leadership training, resources for developing business plans, and access to funding opportunities, all of which are essential for fostering an entrepreneurial mindset.

These support systems and resources are instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by young women and providing them with the tools they need to succeed as leaders and entrepreneurs.

14. Women Entrepreneurs Association of Türkiye(KAĞİDER): <https://www.kagider.org.tr>
15. Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) – Women's Employment Programs: <https://www.iskur.gov.tr>
16. Türkiye İş Bankası Women Entrepreneurs Support Program: <https://www.isbank.com.tr>
17. UNDP Türkiye- Women's Leadership and Entrepreneurship: <https://www.tr.undp.org>



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

Despite the progress made in empowering young women in Türkiye, significant barriers still exist that hinder their leadership and entrepreneurial development. These challenges are multifaceted, ranging from societal expectations to institutional constraints, and they require targeted strategies and interventions to overcome them.

One of the primary obstacles identified by young women themselves is gender-based discrimination. Many young women report encountering societal stereotypes that limit their career opportunities and entrepreneurial aspirations. These stereotypes often position women in traditional roles, such as caregiving or administrative tasks, which can restrict their access to leadership roles and decision-making positions. Furthermore, young women are sometimes faced with a lack of confidence or self-belief, which can be exacerbated by societal messages that undermine their potential to succeed in male-dominated industries.

Another significant barrier is the lack of access to financial resources. Many young women struggle to secure funding for their business ventures due to limited financial literacy, insufficient collateral, or gender biases within financial institutions. This issue is compounded by the fact that women-led businesses are less likely to receive investment compared to their male counterparts, particularly in the early stages of business development.

Additionally, work-life balance remains a challenge for many young women, particularly those who are balancing family responsibilities with their career or entrepreneurial endeavors. Social norms often place the burden of household chores and child-rearing primarily on women, which can limit their time and energy to pursue leadership opportunities or manage their businesses effectively.

The lack of networking opportunities is another challenge cited by young women. In many cases, networking events and professional gatherings are perceived as male-dominated spaces, making it difficult for young women to build the connections needed to advance their careers or entrepreneurial goals.

These barriers highlight the need for comprehensive policies and interventions that address both the structural and social challenges young women face in their leadership and entrepreneurial journeys.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

To enhance the leadership and entrepreneurial potential of young women in Türkiye, several key recommendations are necessary. These suggestions are based on the challenges identified earlier, and aim to create supportive environments that equip young women with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to succeed.

Firstly, there is a strong need for gender-sensitive education and training programs that challenge traditional gender roles. Such programs should be designed to empower young women and provide them with the tools necessary to succeed in leadership and entrepreneurial roles. This could include mentorship programs, skills workshops, and confidence-building initiatives that encourage young women to pursue non-traditional career paths. These programs can also serve as an important platform for addressing issues related to gender discrimination and providing young women with the strategies they need to overcome these barriers.

Additionally, expanding access to financial support for women entrepreneurs is crucial. Many young women face significant barriers when trying to access capital for starting or expanding businesses. Targeted initiatives such as microloans, grants, and specialized financial literacy programs can help alleviate some of these challenges. Furthermore, it is essential that financial institutions offer equal opportunities for funding, regardless of gender, and address any biases in the evaluation process of women-led businesses.

Supporting young women in balancing family responsibilities with their careers or entrepreneurial ventures is another critical area. Policies that promote work-life balance, such as flexible working hours, affordable childcare, and family leave, are essential in enabling women to pursue their professional goals without being hindered by traditional gender expectations. By making the workplace more accommodating to women's needs, we can foster a more inclusive environment that encourages young women to thrive in both their personal and professional lives.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

Facilitating networking and professional development opportunities for women is also crucial for their success. It is important to create women-only spaces at professional networking events or establish platforms where women entrepreneurs can share resources, ideas, and support. This would help overcome barriers to entry in male-dominated networks and encourage women to engage in mentorship relationships with established female leaders. Such initiatives would not only provide valuable guidance but also strengthen the sense of community among young women who are pursuing similar goals.

Finally, public awareness campaigns that highlight the achievements of successful women leaders and entrepreneurs can serve as powerful role models for young women. These campaigns should emphasize the importance of gender equality and challenge societal stereotypes that limit women's opportunities in leadership and entrepreneurship. By shifting societal attitudes, these campaigns can inspire young women to pursue leadership roles and entrepreneurial endeavors with confidence and determination.



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STORIES & VOICES

The interviews conducted with five young women in Türkiye: Sinem, Özge, Emel, Işık, and Yağmurreveal.

Each facing a distinct form of exclusion: from corporate glass ceilings and healthcare stereotypes to post-disaster trauma work and underfunded civil society leadership. Their voices reveal a deep desire for visibility, fair treatment, emotional wellbeing, and institutional support.



Sinem Ece Alkan

26 years old

Barriers linked to discrimination



Özge Gençler

28 years old

Barriers linked to discrimination



Emel Erdem

30 years old

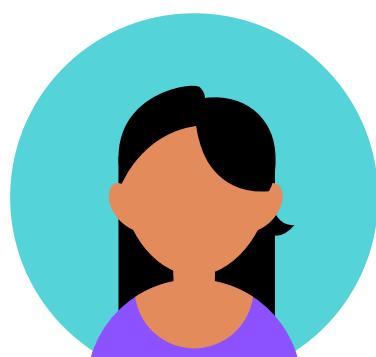
Barriers linked to discrimination



Işık Koca

32 years old

Economic barriers



Yağmur Deniz Kınalı

29 years old

Health problems



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Key Insights

- **Glass ceilings still dominate:** In both corporate and civil society spaces, women consistently reported that decision-making remains male-dominated, and they must work harder to be taken seriously.
- **Stigma in "feminised" professions:** Fields like healthcare or HR, though heavily populated by women, still limit their growth or credibility. Leadership roles are often assumed to suit men better.
- **Motherhood and career anxiety:** Multiple participants expressed concern that becoming mothers might threaten their career progression—due to lack of support or implicit bias in workplaces.
- **Invisible labour in trauma contexts:** Women working in mental health, especially post-earthquake or with refugee communities, reported severe emotional burnout and lack of institutional backing for their own wellbeing.
- **Funding and recognition barriers for women-led NGOs:** Women leading grassroots organisations in Türkiye face greater scrutiny, less access to funding, and must constantly “prove themselves” in male-dominated networks.



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Recommendations for NGOs and Policy Makers



- **Boost mentorship and visible female leadership:** Create structured mentorship schemes that connect young women with experienced female leaders in their sectors.
- **Institutionalise family-friendly workplace policies:** Ensure that women can plan motherhood without sacrificing their professional growth—through childcare access, flexible hours, and protected career tracks.
- **Secure funding and visibility for women-led initiatives:** Simplify grant application processes and prioritise support for NGOs led by women in marginalised or rural contexts.
- **Provide emotional support structures:** Recognise the emotional burden on women in healthcare, psychology, and trauma work. Build in institutional support and prevent burnout through supervision, training, and peer groups.
- **Foster inclusive, safe professional networks:** Encourage the creation of spaces (both mixed and women-only) where young women can exchange ideas, voice challenges, and receive support without fear of judgment or exclusion.



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PORTUGAL



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Country Snapshot

Portugal has made notable progress in gender equality, particularly in education, where women now surpass men in tertiary attainment. Despite this, young women—especially from disadvantaged backgrounds—continue to face systemic barriers in employment, entrepreneurship, and leadership. Youth unemployment among women remains high, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas, and access to professional networks and opportunities is limited. Only 30% of entrepreneurs in Portugal are women, many of whom struggle to secure funding due to gender stereotypes and lack of representation in investor circles.

Work-life balance is another challenge, as caregiving responsibilities still fall disproportionately on women, limiting their professional engagement. While policies for gender equality exist, implementation is uneven. Gender-based violence and discrimination remain widespread, with over a quarter of Portuguese women reporting having experienced abuse. Young women from minority groups face added layers of exclusion. Despite these challenges, promising practices like mentorship programs and digital outreach are emerging. However, sustained investment and inclusive strategies are essential to empower all young women, particularly those in marginalized communities.

To address these issues, several organizations and institutions have launched targeted programs. For instance, the C-Level Mentorship Academy connects young women with executive mentors, while the National Association of Young Entrepreneurs (ANJE) advocates for introducing entrepreneurship education from early schooling. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have also become critical tools for outreach and engagement. Nevertheless, these efforts must be scaled and adapted to meet the specific realities of disadvantaged youth, ensuring equity not just in access but in outcomes.



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

Young women in Portugal identify **practical, hands-on learning** as one of the most effective ways to build leadership and entrepreneurial skills. They consistently emphasized the importance of training that is grounded in real-life situations—such as project-based learning, internships, or simulations—rather than purely theoretical approaches. This type of learning helps them gain confidence, develop applicable skills, and feel more prepared for entering the workforce or starting their own initiatives.

Equally important is the creation of **supportive and inclusive environments**. Many participants highlighted how essential it is to feel safe, respected, and truly listened to, particularly for those from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds. Inclusion, they stressed, must go beyond symbolic gestures; it should allow them to contribute meaningfully and grow as leaders.

Mentorship opportunities were also a recurring theme. Respondents expressed a strong desire for programs that connect young women with experienced female mentors who can provide not only inspiration but also practical guidance and access to professional networks. Having someone to look up to and consult with was seen as a powerful tool for personal and career development.

Additionally, young women highly value **programs that offer certifications or concrete project outcomes**. These elements help validate their participation and improve their chances in the job market, especially for those who may not have formal qualifications.

Lastly, **active outreach through social media platforms**—particularly Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—was considered key. These channels are the most effective way to reach young women, communicate opportunities, and encourage their engagement in leadership and entrepreneurship initiatives.



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

In Portugal, organizations and decision-makers have begun to adopt promising practices aimed at fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women. One notable example is the **C-Level Mentorship Academy**, a structured mentorship initiative launched by Ponto Zero. This program brings together approximately 40 senior executives—both women and men—from various sectors to mentor young women. The goal is to promote their personal and professional development by giving them direct access to leadership insights, career guidance, and networking opportunities. By connecting emerging female talent with experienced leaders, the program helps young women gain confidence, develop their skills, and better understand how to navigate complex professional environments. It also encourages mentors to reflect on gender dynamics within leadership structures, creating a two-way learning experience that contributes to long-term cultural change within organizations.

Another significant recommendation comes from **The National Association of Young Entrepreneurs (ANJE)**, which has proposed embedding **financial literacy and entrepreneurship education** throughout the national education system—from elementary school to university. The aim is to introduce young people, especially girls, to core concepts such as business planning, investment strategy, and risk management from an early age. This approach not only demystifies entrepreneurship but also empowers young women to view leadership and business ownership as attainable goals. Integrating these topics into formal education allows girls to build critical thinking and decision-making skills over time, laying the foundation for future entrepreneurial endeavors.

Together, these initiatives highlight the importance of long-term, structural approaches that combine **mentorship, education, and access to networks** to ensure young women can lead with confidence and resilience in diverse professional arenas.



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

Despite some progress in gender equality, young women in Portugal still face several significant **barriers** that hinder their ability to develop leadership and entrepreneurial skills. One of the most frequently mentioned challenges is **limited access to opportunities in rural or disadvantaged areas**. While some respondents described education as “very accessible,” many noted it was only “somewhat accessible,” pointing to persistent **geographical and socioeconomic inequalities**. In these regions, access to quality training, reliable internet, mentorship, and extracurricular programs is often limited or completely absent, leaving young women with fewer chances to explore leadership pathways or participate in entrepreneurship initiatives.

Another recurring issue is **exclusion from established networks or groups**. Several participants reported that youth programs or training opportunities were often targeted at specific groups or communities that already had access to resources or connections. As a result, young women without ties to those networks felt invisible or uninvited, reinforcing existing social inequalities and limiting their ability to participate meaningfully in development programs.

Additionally, some trainings offered to young women lacked **practical or real-world relevance**. Participants explained that when workshops or courses were overly theoretical or disconnected from everyday realities, they failed to engage or empower them. This made it difficult to translate what they learned into action or feel confident in applying their knowledge in real-life contexts.

Finally, **gender-based exclusion** was reported by multiple respondents. Young women shared experiences of being overlooked, dismissed, or not taken seriously—particularly in educational or training settings dominated by male peers or facilitators. These experiences led to feelings of frustration, isolation, and in some cases, a loss of motivation to continue participating. For true inclusion to occur, these systemic and cultural barriers must be actively addressed.



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

From the perspective of organizations and decision-makers in Portugal, one of the most significant and persistent **barriers to fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women** is the **limited access to financing**. Despite the increasing number of women interested in entrepreneurship, many face systemic difficulties when trying to secure funding for their projects or business ideas. A common issue is the **lack of investor confidence** in women-led ventures, which is often not based on merit or potential but rather on entrenched **gender stereotypes** that continue to influence decision-making processes within financial institutions and investment networks.

In many cases, women are perceived as higher-risk investments or are expected to prove themselves more rigorously than their male counterparts. This dynamic creates an unequal playing field and discourages young women from pursuing entrepreneurial paths. Additionally, the **lack of diversified investment networks**—which are often dominated by men—means that women have fewer opportunities to connect with investors who understand their ideas, backgrounds, or business approaches. Without access to these networks, young women frequently find themselves excluded from pitch competitions, grant programs, or seed funding initiatives that could otherwise support their professional development.

Decision-makers recognize the need to **bridge this gender gap in access to capital**, but current efforts remain insufficient or limited in scope. To foster a truly inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, it is essential to dismantle the biases that shape investment decisions and to actively promote investment in women-led projects through targeted funding schemes, gender-aware investor education, and inclusive financial policies. Without addressing this foundational barrier, broader efforts to promote leadership among young women will continue to fall short.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

According to young people in Portugal, several critical challenges must be addressed to effectively foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. One of the most fundamental issues is the **need to help young women see themselves as leaders**. Many respondents shared that societal expectations, cultural norms, and the lack of visible role models often prevent girls and young women from envisioning themselves in leadership roles. Leadership is frequently portrayed in a narrow, traditionally male-dominated framework, which makes it difficult for young women—especially those who do not fit dominant social norms—to feel entitled to pursue such roles. There is a pressing need for empowerment strategies that build self-confidence, promote inclusive narratives of leadership, and affirm the value of diverse experiences and perspectives.

Another key challenge is **limited accessibility**, especially for those living in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. Young women in these contexts often have fewer opportunities to participate in training, mentoring programs, or networking events. Infrastructure limitations, lack of transportation, and reduced access to technology can all contribute to their exclusion. These geographic and social barriers must be actively addressed through outreach initiatives, localized programming, and digital inclusion strategies that bring resources directly to underserved communities.

Additionally, young people highlighted the importance of **increasing visibility**. They stressed that programs and opportunities often fail to reach their intended audience due to poor communication or reliance on traditional dissemination methods. Young women need to see more campaigns, stories, and initiatives that reflect their realities and potential. To do so, organizations must utilize **social media platforms**—such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook—more effectively, adopting a direct, engaging, and youth-oriented approach. Improving visibility not only boosts participation but also helps normalize the idea of young women as capable, empowered leaders and entrepreneurs in today's society.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

One of the most pressing challenges identified by organizations and decision-makers in Portugal in relation to fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women is the **difficulty of reconciling professional and personal life**. This issue is deeply rooted in structural inequalities that place a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities on women. For many young women, the expectation to prioritize family duties over career development creates significant obstacles to their full participation in leadership roles or entrepreneurial ventures. Even when they are ambitious and qualified, the perceived or real burden of balancing work and family life often discourages them from pursuing long-term professional goals.

This challenge is further aggravated by the **lack of comprehensive family support policies**. Although Portugal has made strides in recent years in promoting gender equality in the labor market, the implementation of supportive measures—such as accessible childcare services, flexible work arrangements, and parental leave policies—remains limited or inconsistent. As a result, many young women, particularly those from low-income backgrounds or rural areas, find themselves without the institutional support necessary to juggle both personal and professional aspirations.

Decision-makers acknowledge that fostering female leadership and entrepreneurship cannot be achieved without addressing these underlying structural constraints. Promoting leadership is not only about providing skills or opportunities—it also requires transforming the social and policy environment that surrounds young women. Therefore, organizations stress the importance of integrating **gender-sensitive family and labor policies** into national strategies, ensuring that women are not forced to choose between professional development and family life. Only by enabling true work-life balance can the full leadership potential of young women be realized across all sectors of society.



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STORIES & VOICES

The interviews were conducted with five young women in Portugal: Sara, Esther, Mariana, Inês and Lara. Despite their differences, the participants shared common experiences and perspectives regarding the challenges young women face in pursuing leadership and entrepreneurial paths, particularly those from disadvantaged settings.

They strongly agree on the importance of including young women at risk in decision-making processes .They emphasized that real inclusion goes far beyond simply having a seat at the table; it involves listening and trusting their leadership.



Sara

20 years old

Youth worker



Esther

25 years old

Youth worker



Mariana

19 years old

Vision Science Student



Inês

24 years old

Computer Engineering Student



Lara

17 years old

High School Student



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Key Insights

- **Inclusion vs. Tokenism:** Participants emphasized that being included in decision-making spaces is not enough; what matters is being heard and trusted. Symbolic inclusion, such as being chosen for diversity optics, is disempowering.
- **Consent and Autonomy:** Young women frequently found themselves in environments where they were expected to conform without question. Saying "no" or making mistakes was seen as a risk with broader implications for their gender or community.
- **Dismissal and Disrespect:** All interviewees had experiences of having their opinions dismissed due to their age and gender, leading to self-doubt and hesitation to participate in future discussions.
- **Unequal Recognition:** Women reported having to work significantly harder to receive the same level of acknowledgment as their male peers. Over-performance was often necessary to be taken seriously.
- **Variable Leadership Access:** While some participants, like Esther and Lara, had access to leadership roles through mentoring or volunteering, others faced a lack of opportunities and structural support.
- **Organizational Accountability.** Participants called on organizations to:
 - Actively listen to young women's perspectives.
 - Provide real, not symbolic, leadership roles.
 - Offer mentorship, safe spaces, and fair compensation.
 - Promote gender equality education among men.
- **Different Paths to Activism:** Confidence and access shaped how participants engaged in social change. Some took proactive roles in their communities, while others supported initiatives quietly but with strong commitment.



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Recommendations for NGOs and Policy Makers



- **Ensure Meaningful Participation:** Move beyond symbolic inclusion by giving young women real decision-making power and trusting their leadership.
- **Promote Practical Training and Mentorship:** Offer hands-on programs that include certifications, internships, or real-world project experience. Connect participants with female mentors and role models.
- **Improve Accessibility in Disadvantaged Areas:** Expand outreach to rural and underserved communities through mobile units, online platforms, or local partnerships.
- **Foster Environments of Respect and Consent:** Create spaces where saying "no" is respected, mistakes are part of learning, and young women feel psychologically safe.
- **Address Recognition Gaps:** Develop transparent criteria for evaluating contributions and reward young women fairly. Acknowledge the extra emotional and social labor they often undertake.
- **Support Entrepreneurial Equity:** Facilitate access to funding and entrepreneurship networks that actively support women-led initiatives. Counter gender stereotypes in investment circles.
- **Involve Men in Gender Equity Efforts:** Educate boys and young men on gender equality from early ages to create allies in dismantling systemic barriers.
- **Institutionalize Inclusion Policies:** Implement concrete frameworks within organizations to monitor and ensure the sustained inclusion of young women, especially from marginalized backgrounds.



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POLAND



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Country Snapshot

Poland has made steady progress in promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship and leadership, especially through education and government-backed programs. Courses like Basics of Entrepreneurship are mandatory in secondary schools, providing early exposure to business concepts. Government initiatives such as “**Pierwszy Biznes – Wsparcie w Starcie**” offer young people low-interest loans, grants, and mentorship to support their entrepreneurial ambitions. These efforts are supported by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) and often co-funded by the EU.

NGOs also play a vital role. Organizations like **Youth Business Poland**, **Startup Poland**, and **Youth Human Impact** offer mentorship, training, and networking for young entrepreneurs. Programs like “**EmPOWERed in Business**” (MOCne w biznesie) provide free training and financial support tailored to women, helping bridge the gap between academic education and real-world entrepreneurial experience.

However, significant barriers persist. Women in Poland often lack access to financing and face cultural expectations that limit their professional ambitions. Only **33% of Polish women** feel they have adequate entrepreneurial skills (vs. 54% of men), and **65% cite fear of failure** as a major obstacle—well above the EU average. Traditional gender roles, especially around motherhood and household responsibilities, continue to impact women’s leadership participation.

To address these issues, experts recommend strengthening **entrepreneurial education for girls**, improving **access to finance**, and implementing **family-friendly policies**. Creating a more supportive environment—both socially and structurally—is key to unlocking the full potential of young women in Poland’s entrepreneurial ecosystem.



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

From the perspective of young people, **Poland is making meaningful progress in fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills** among youth, particularly through early educational and policy interventions. The government has taken significant steps to integrate entrepreneurship education into the national curriculum. In secondary schools, mandatory subjects such as Basics of Entrepreneurship and optional courses like Economics in Practice have been introduced to ignite interest in business and build foundational skills. This early exposure helps demystify the world of entrepreneurship while promoting creativity, problem-solving, and self-confidence among students¹.

In addition to formal education, targeted support programs play a vital role. The “**Pierwszy Biznes – Wsparcie w Starcie**” initiative is designed to assist young graduates and unemployed youth (typically aged 15 to 29) in overcoming initial barriers to starting a business. The program offers low-interest loans, non-repayable grants, and personalized mentorship—providing young entrepreneurs with practical tools to launch and sustain their ventures. These programs are frequently co-financed by the European Union and implemented through public agencies such as the **Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP)**, ensuring they are widely accessible and well-resourced¹.

Beyond government action, **NGOs contribute significantly** to fostering youth entrepreneurship. Organizations like **Youth Business Poland**, **Youth Human Impact, and Startup Poland** actively engage young people through workshops, mentoring programs, startup competitions, and networking events. These initiatives help bridge the gap between academic learning and the real-world demands of business, encouraging a mindset that embraces innovation, resilience, and leadership. By creating inclusive environments and offering peer-based support, these organizations empower young people to experiment, learn from failure, and take meaningful steps toward building entrepreneurial futures².

1. OECD. Inclusive Entrepreneurship Policies: Country Assessment Notes – Poland, 2018.

2. InnovationsLab, Central European University. Women in the InnovationsLab Startup Ecosystem of Poland, 2023.



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Good practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

According to both government bodies and leading NGOs, **Poland has taken several meaningful steps to support the development of leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women**. One of the most notable efforts is the integration of entrepreneurship education into both secondary and higher education curricula. Led by the **Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP)**, these initiatives include mandatory subjects designed to spark interest in business and leadership early on. This educational approach not only provides essential knowledge but also promotes creativity, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills—particularly important for young women who may not traditionally see themselves as entrepreneurs¹.

A central government initiative is the “**Pierwszy Biznes – Wsparcie w Starcie**” program, which targets young graduates and unemployed youth between the ages of 15 and 29. It provides low-interest loans, non-repayable grants, and individualized mentorship to reduce both financial and technical barriers. These forms of support are co-financed by EU funds and managed by national agencies to ensure broad accessibility. This program helps young women move from education to practical action, increasing their ability to create and sustain businesses¹.

In the non-governmental sector, initiatives such as “**EmPOWERed in Business**” (**MOCne w biznesie**)—co-led by **Santander Bank Polska** and the **Polish Foundation of Entrepreneurship**—offer tailored support to women launching their own ventures. These programs combine free training, one-on-one mentorship, and financial assistance. Beyond technical skills like digital marketing or financial planning, they offer access to female role models and professional networks. This holistic support helps women overcome traditional gender roles and build lasting confidence to lead in the entrepreneurial landscape².

1. InnovationsLab, Central European University. Women in the InnovationsLab Startup Ecosystem of Poland, 2023.
2. SheAtWork. Empowering Women Entrepreneurship: Unveiling Poland’s Support Ecosystem, 2023.



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

According to the experiences gathered by young people, particularly through the perspective of Youth Human Impact NGO, several persistent **barriers continue to hinder the development of leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women in Poland**. One of the most deeply rooted obstacles is the **prevalence of stereotypes and societal expectations**. There remains a widespread belief that women should pursue "safe" or traditionally feminine careers, avoiding high-risk paths like entrepreneurship. These norms are often reinforced by older generations, whose influence continues to shape the career decisions of young women.

Another key issue is the **lack of structured support within the education system**. Many schools still do not offer mentoring programs or extracurricular activities specifically aimed at developing entrepreneurial skills in girls. Without targeted guidance or opportunities to practice leadership, many young women miss out on essential early experiences that could build their confidence and capabilities in this area.

Self-confidence is also a significant barrier. Young women often report **lower levels of self-esteem** when it comes to leadership or business-related activities. This lack of confidence can deter them from pursuing opportunities or voicing their ideas, limiting their growth before they even begin.

In addition, there is a notable **lack of visible female role models** in both education and the media. Few well-known women entrepreneurs or leaders are promoted as examples for young women to look up to, making it harder for them to imagine themselves in those roles.

Finally, **work-life balance concerns** remain a powerful deterrent. Social expectations around motherhood and domestic responsibilities often place the burden of care on women, which discourages many from taking on the demanding and time-consuming challenges of running a business or stepping into leadership positions.



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Bad practices for fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

From the perspective of organizations and decision-makers in Poland, **several key structural and cultural barriers continue to hinder the development of leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women**. One of the most persistent issues is the presence of discouraging social and cultural attitudes. Traditional gender roles often undermine women's confidence and perceived legitimacy as entrepreneurs, reducing their engagement in business ventures¹.

Another major challenge is the **low self-perception of entrepreneurial skills**. In Poland, only **33% of women** believe they possess the necessary knowledge and experience to start a business, compared to **54% of men**¹. This reflects both actual skill gaps and internalized social expectations, which limit women's willingness to take entrepreneurial risks.

The **fear of failure** is also more pronounced among Polish women, with **65% indicating it would prevent them** from launching a business—well above the EU average of 52%¹. This fear acts as a significant psychological barrier to initiating entrepreneurial activity.

Additionally, the **responsibility of balancing work and family life** remains a critical obstacle. The unequal distribution of household and caregiving duties continues to discourage women from pursuing demanding business careers. Without comprehensive family support policies, this imbalance persists.

Lastly, **limited access to finance** poses a structural barrier. Around **63% of women-led** firms in Poland report that access to funding is a constraint, revealing the need for more inclusive financial mechanisms and targeted support for women entrepreneurs².

1. OECD. Policy Brief on Women's Entrepreneurship, 2018.

2. World Bank Group. Poland Gender Landscape, 2023.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Young people

According to young people in Poland, **there are several key challenges and priority areas that must be addressed to effectively foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women**. A central issue is the lack of practical entrepreneurial education. Many young Poles feel that the current education system does not sufficiently prepare them for real-world business environments. Integrating hands-on, skills-based entrepreneurial training into school curricula could equip young women with the tools and confidence needed to pursue entrepreneurial ventures and take on leadership roles¹.

Another important factor is the impact of **societal attitudes and self-perception**. While many Polish youth express a strong interest in entrepreneurship, cultural and historical narratives often shape how they view themselves in these roles. For young women in particular, entrenched gender norms can discourage ambition and diminish self-efficacy. Initiatives aimed at **challenging these norms and empowering young women** to see themselves as capable leaders are essential for long-term change².

In addition to formal education, young people emphasize the value of **social and civic initiatives as informal learning spaces**. Programs like “*Zwolnieni z Teorii*” allow participants to lead social projects that develop vital entrepreneurial competencies such as teamwork, communication, and project management. These experiences provide a supportive environment for leadership growth and practical skill development, especially for those who might lack access to traditional resources. Strengthening and scaling such programs can offer young women inclusive, real-world pathways to leadership and entrepreneurship.

1. Vasilescu, M.D., Crivoi, E.-S., & Munteanu, A.-M. (2025). Exploring Entrepreneurial Intention among European Union Youth by Education and Employment Status.
2. Rantanen, T., Toikko, T., & Pawlak, A. (2015). The Significance of Social Welfare Attitudes in Young People's Entrepreneurial Intentions.



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Most important challenges and topics to address in order to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women, according to:

Organizations

According to organizations and decision-makers in Poland, **there are several structural and policy-related challenges that must be addressed to foster leadership and entrepreneurial skills among young women**. One of the most pressing issues is the existence of **structural barriers and gender bias**. Women entrepreneurs often face obstacles such as unequal access to funding, limited inclusion in decision-making spaces, and persistent societal expectations that associate leadership and entrepreneurship with male roles. These dynamics create an uneven playing field that hinders women's progress and visibility in the entrepreneurial ecosystem¹.

To counter these inequalities, there is a clear recognition of the importance of **educational and skills development initiatives**. Empowering women through targeted training programs that enhance leadership, business planning, digital literacy, and strategic thinking is essential. The "**Integrated Skills Strategy**" is one such initiative designed to strengthen the competencies of women across various sectors. These programs help build confidence and equip women with the tools needed to lead effectively and sustainably².

Equally important is the need for **comprehensive policy frameworks and coordinated support systems**. Policymakers acknowledge that fostering inclusive entrepreneurship requires more than isolated interventions. A holistic, gender-sensitive policy approach—one that specifically addresses the distinct barriers faced by women entrepreneurs—is necessary to ensure that support systems respond to real needs. Promoting inclusive practices, flexible funding mechanisms, and strong institutional commitment is key to building a more equitable and empowering entrepreneurial environment in Poland¹.

1. UN Women. Policy Document for Poland.

2. European Commission. Exchange of Good Practices on Gender Equality: Encouraging Female Entrepreneurship – Poland Comments Paper, 2014.



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STORIES & VOICES

The interviews conducted in Poland included five young women: one anonymous participant, and four named participants—Julia, Natalia, Polina, and Dorota.

Their stories reflect a common struggle: the tension between their aspirations and the limitations imposed by age, gender, geography, and lack of systemic support. From being tokenized in organizational spaces, to lacking affordable training options, to experiencing subtle exclusion at work, their accounts shed light on the daily realities young women encounter when trying to grow, lead, or pursue independence.



Anonymous
25 years old
Unemployed



Natalia
21 years old
Young mother



Dorota
21 years old
Student



Julia
22 years old
HR Assistant



Polina
27 years old
Student/ Educator



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Key Insights

- **Symbolic Inclusion and Lack of Recognition:** Several participants reported being invited to participate in projects or organizations, only to realize their input was largely ignored. Their involvement was often used for image purposes rather than genuine collaboration.
- **Barriers in Employment and Leadership:** Young women, especially in male-dominated sectors, reported being sidelined from important tasks, not due to skill but due to age and gender assumptions. Leadership potential was often dismissed or underutilized.
- **Educational and Economic Exclusion:** Natalia's experience highlights how young women without diplomas or access to affordable childcare struggle to return to education or employment. Lack of clear communication and judgmental attitudes further discourage participation.
- **The Power of Peer Support and Informal Initiatives:** Community-led workshops, informal peer groups, and local action (such as organizing recycling or women's support sessions) created spaces for agency and growth. These actions often provided more empowerment than institutional programs.
- **Migrants and Minority Voices:** Polina's testimony underscored the need for emotional and structural support for migrant young women. Language, isolation, and overburdening in crisis response roles (like working with Ukrainian children during the war) can go unnoticed and unsupported.
- **Self-advocacy and Resilience:** All interviewees demonstrated perseverance—applying for grants, organizing independently, or speaking up—yet all stressed that this personal effort should not be a requirement for access or recognition.



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Recommendations for NGOs and Policy Makers



- **Listen and Co-Design:** Initiatives should be developed in partnership with the young women they aim to support. Programs must reflect their real needs, lived experiences, and diverse realities.
- **Move Beyond Symbolic Representation:** Young women must be included meaningfully in planning, not just used for visibility. Avoid tokenism and actively involve them in leadership and decision-making roles.
- **Improve Accessibility and Outreach:** Promote opportunities more widely and clearly—especially in rural areas. Use inclusive communication and reduce bureaucracy around funding and training programs.
- **Support Young Mothers and Dropouts:** Offer free or subsidized courses, provide childcare, and eliminate judgment. Ensure pathways for re-engagement in education and work are realistic and welcoming.
- **Foster Safe Peer Spaces:** Facilitate women-led groups that allow for open sharing, mutual support, and confidence-building. These spaces are vital for personal growth and collective empowerment.
- **Recognize Migrant and Minority Needs:** Provide emotional and logistical support to migrants and newcomers. Avoid overburdening them and ensure inclusion is sensitive to language, identity, and cultural barriers.
- **Provide Early and Ongoing Mentorship:** Mentorship should be proactive, continuous, and responsive. Don't wait until reports are due—support should begin early and be relationship-based.



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CONCLUSION

This guide emerges from a deep collective effort to better understand, support, and empower young women from disadvantaged backgrounds across four European countries: **Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Türkiye**. Built on the voices of over **400 young survey respondents** and **20 in-depth interviews**, it reflects a diverse yet remarkably aligned vision of what young women truly need to thrive—**not just to be seen, but to be heard, trusted, and supported**.

What we learned across borders is clear: young women are already active, resilient, and ambitious. However, they are often held back by **structural inequalities, social expectations, and systems that fail to see their full potential**. Whether it's navigating underfunded education, confronting gender bias in male-dominated industries, or balancing motherhood without support, their challenges are real—but so is their determination to lead and create change.

Through this guide, we share not only data and analysis, but also **lived realities**. These stories highlight the importance of **mentorship, accessibility, representation, and safe spaces**. They show how **meaningful participation, rather than symbolic inclusion**, can empower young women to become agents of transformation in their communities.

The work of the four partner organizations—**Youth Human Impact (Poland)**, **EuroMuévete (Spain)**, **Alexandretta Youth Association (Türkiye)**, and **Associação Inspira! (Portugal)**—demonstrates that with the right approach, outreach and training can become powerful tools for inclusion and empowerment.

This guide is not the end—it is a starting point. A call to action for **youth workers, educators, NGOs, and institutions** to reflect, adapt, and step up. We invite you to take these findings, insights, and recommendations forward in your daily work—to **amplify voices, challenge systems, and co-create opportunities with young women**, not just for them.

Together, we can build a Europe where **no young woman is left behind—not because of where she comes from, but because we've made space for where she's going**.



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