



# Needs Assessment Report – Women in Business in Bulgaria

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RPIV

## Versioning and Contribution History

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# Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a Needs Assessment on women's entrepreneurship in Bulgaria, developed within the framework of the IMPACTA project. The assessment analyses structural conditions, policy frameworks, labour market trends, and ecosystem-level practices affecting women entrepreneurs, with particular attention to vulnerable target group, including rural women, young women, mompreneurs, women in their silver ages, refugees, and women engaged in social entrepreneurship.

The research applies a mixed-method approach combining desk research and qualitative expert interviews. The desk research was conducted between December 2025 and February 2026 and included analysis of national statistical data, European indicators, policy documents, operational programmes, and relevant analytical reports. This component provided the quantitative and regulatory context shaping women's labour market participation and entrepreneurial activity.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured expert interviews conducted in February 2026. The interviewees represented different segments of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, including financial institutions, angel investment networks, business consultancy, university-based entrepreneurship education, and non-governmental organisations working with vulnerable women. The interviews provided practice-based insights into ecosystem gaps, structural barriers, and effective support mechanisms.

The analysis shows that women in Bulgaria demonstrate relatively high labour market participation rates. However, their entrepreneurial activity remains structurally constrained. Women are more likely to operate micro and small enterprises concentrated in services and lower-growth sectors. Persistent barriers include limited access to finance, administrative complexity, care responsibilities, sectoral segregation, and regional disparities. The gender pay gap and limited representation in decision-making positions further reflect structural inequalities.

The review of the regulatory and policy framework indicates that Bulgaria has established a broad formal architecture supporting gender equality, labour market participation, and entrepreneurship. However, support for women's entrepreneurship remains largely indirect and gender-neutral. Innovation and competitiveness programmes often have high entry thresholds, while rural and territorial instruments are more accessible but limited in long-term business development components. As a result, women with stronger educational backgrounds and better institutional access benefit more consistently than disadvantaged groups.

The interviews confirm that entrepreneurship can function as a pathway for labour market integration and economic empowerment, particularly when combined with structured mentoring, financial literacy development, access to adapted financial instruments, and strong peer networks. Confidence-building, motivation, digital skills, and long-term mentoring relationships are identified as critical success factors. Fragmentation of existing support mechanisms remains a key systemic weakness.

The findings underline the need for more integrated and gender-responsive support pathways that connect skills development, mentoring, financing, and institutional guidance. Strengthening care infrastructure, simplifying administrative procedures, improving access to finance, and increasing women's representation in decision-making processes are essential to unlocking the full potential of women's entrepreneurship in Bulgaria.

## 1 Methodological approach

This Needs Assessment applies a mixed-method research design combining desk research and qualitative expert interviews. The aim was to analyse both structural conditions and ecosystem-level practices affecting women's entrepreneurship in Bulgaria, with a particular focus on disadvantaged and non-traditional groups.

The desk research component included analysis of national statistical data, European indicators, policy documents, operational programmes, and relevant national and international reports. This provided the quantitative and regulatory context shaping women's labour market participation and entrepreneurial activity.

The qualitative component consisted of six semi-structured expert interviews conducted between December 2025 and February 2026. The selected experts represent different segments of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, including financial institutions, angel investment networks, business consultancy, university-based entrepreneurship education, and non-governmental organisations working with vulnerable groups.

The interviews followed a structured thematic framework aligned with the IMPACTA research questions. Data were analysed using thematic synthesis, identifying recurring patterns, structural barriers, support mechanisms and ecosystem gaps. The findings are presented in an integrated narrative form rather than as isolated individual responses.

## 2 Methodology for collecting country-level data

Country-level data were collected through desk research and qualitative expert interviews.

The qualitative data collection consisted exclusively of semi-structured expert interviews. Interviews were conducted both online and offline, depending on logistical conditions and participant preference. No focus groups were organised.

The interviews were conducted in February 2026. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

A total of 6 experts participated. The sample included:

- Representatives of financial institutions implementing women-focused programmes
- Members of the angel investment ecosystem
- Business consultants specialising in SME development and EU-funded programmes
- University entrepreneurship educators
- Mentors and trainers
- NGO experts working in social innovation and with vulnerable women

Participants were selected based on their direct professional engagement with women entrepreneurs and their knowledge of structural and policy-level barriers.

The discussions took place in the context of:

- The 2021–2027 EU programming period and related operational programmes
- Ongoing labour market reforms and debates on access to finance
- Continued integration of refugee populations, including women from Ukraine and third countries
- Regional disparities between urban and rural municipalities

### 3 Bulgarian profile of women entrepreneurs

Thematic area	Statistical indicator - type	Definition/ description	Data sources	Statistical indicator - amount	Most recent Y	notes
Women's entrepreneurship	% of female entrepreneurs	Share of women among self-employed or business owners	National Statistical Institute (NSI), Employed and employment rates – Main Labour Force Survey Results for the 3Q.2025	<b>35.7%</b>	2025	Self-employed women = 38.6%  Business owners = 32.1%
	% of firms with female participation in business top management	Share of firms in which the top manager (highest managerial position) is a woman.	World Bank Enterprise Surveys 2023	<b>23.5%</b>	2023	All firms: 23.5% Small sized: 25.3% Medium sized: 21.8% Big companies: 13.9%
		Sectoral distribution of women-led businesses (e.g., tech, agriculture, services)		<b>N/A</b>		No available data
	% of women-led businesses surviving after 3 or 5 years	Business survival rate for women-led businesses	National Statistical Institute (NSI), Business Survival of Enterprises Born in 2020	<b>58.1%</b>	2023	Total number of born in 2020 = 35 906
	% of women entrepreneurs with access to financing	Access to finance (loans, grants)		<b>N/A</b>		No available data
	Indicator of innovation and	Digitalisation of women-owned businesses		<b>N/A</b>		No available data

Thematic area	Statistical indicator - type	Definition/ description	Data sources	Statistical indicator - amount	Most recent Y	notes
	competitiveness					
<b>Social innovation</b>	Women-led social enterprises	Number of registered social enterprises led by women		<b>N/A</b>		No available data. In Bulgaria there is data for registered social enterprises, but we cannot define how many apply social innovation, or are led by women
<b>Labour market integration</b>	Female working-age population	Women aged 15-64 (or national standard)	National Statistical Institute (NSI), Population by working age, status, place of residence, sex and by districts and municipalities as of 31.12.2024	<b>1795144</b>	2024	
	Female active labour force	Women who are employed or actively seeking work	NSI, Labour force and activity rates of population of 15-64 years of age for the 3Q.2025	<b>1374700</b>	2025	
	Female employment rate	% of women aged 15-64 who are employed	NSI, Employed and employment rates of population aged 15-64, Q3 2025	<b>68.1%</b>	2025	
	NEET rate among women	% of women not in education, employment, or training	Eurostat, Young persons neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) by sex, 2024	<b>14.8%</b>	2024	NEET age group = 15-29 years
<b>Social policies</b>	Availability of childcare	% of children (0-3) in formal childcare	Eurostat, Children in formal childcare or education by age group,	<b>21.2%</b>	2024	This value represents the share of children aged

Thematic area	Statistical indicator - type	Definition/ description	Data sources	Statistical indicator - amount	Most recent Y	notes
			duration and income quintile 2024			0–3 in Bulgaria attending formal childcare for any duration in 2024.
	Parental leave uptake (female /male)	% of women using parental leave		N/A		No available data
Gender equality	Gender Pay Gap	Difference in average gross hourly wages (men vs women)	National Statistical Institute (NSI), Gender pay gap	13.1%	2023	Data excludes Agriculture sector; covers enterprises with 10+ employees; strong variation across sectors.
	Gender Equality Index (if available)	Composite score	European Institute for Gender Equality	64.5	2024	Bulgaria ranks 17th in the EU. Score decreased by 0.6 points since 2021. Biggest decline in Power domain (-3.9 points). Score improvement since 2010: +9.5 points

## 3.1 Regulatory and policy framework

This section analyses the Bulgarian regulatory and policy framework relevant to women's entrepreneurship, with a specific focus on its relevance and accessibility for the project's main target groups. The analysis draws on a comprehensive mapping of national legislation, strategic documents, operational programmes, and territorial funding instruments, and links these policy tools to the needs and systemic barriers faced by vulnerable and strategic groups of women, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

Bulgaria has developed a broad and coherent policy architecture addressing gender equality, labour market participation, social inclusion, innovation, and entrepreneurship. However, support for women's entrepreneurship is largely indirect, fragmented across policy domains, and predominantly gender-neutral. As a result, the effectiveness of this framework varies significantly across target groups, with better outcomes for women with higher levels of education, urban location, and existing business capacity, and more limited reach among vulnerable and non-traditional entrepreneurs.

### 3.1.1 Horizontal legal framework and target groups

Bulgaria's core legislative framework establishes general principles of equality and access but addresses the needs of the project's target groups primarily in an indirect manner.

The **Protection Against Discrimination Act**<sup>1</sup> provides legal safeguards against discrimination on grounds such as gender, ethnicity, age, family status, disability, and refugee status. This legal framework is particularly relevant for:

- **Ethnic minorities, refugees and displaced persons, and older women**, who face a higher risk of discrimination in employment and business environments;
- **Women in their silver ages and late-stage career changers**, who may encounter age-related barriers when re-entering the labour market or establishing businesses.

While the Act ensures formal equality and provides access to complaint mechanisms through the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, it does not introduce proactive measures, incentives, or affirmative instruments to address structural

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<sup>1</sup> Protection Against Discrimination Act, 2003, [https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/BULGARIA\\_Law%20on%20protection%20against%20discrimination.pdf](https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/BULGARIA_Law%20on%20protection%20against%20discrimination.pdf)

disadvantages. Consequently, its direct impact on entrepreneurial outcomes remains limited, particularly for women with low legal awareness, limited institutional trust, or restricted access to support services.

The **Employment Promotion Act**<sup>2</sup> regulates active labour market policies, including self-employment incentives, subsidised employment, and training measures. These instruments are potentially accessible to:

- **Young women, undereducated women, and long-term unemployed women;**
- **Late-stage career changers and women in their silver ages** seeking re-entry into economic activity.

However, access to these measures is typically conditional on registration with employment services and compliance with administrative procedures. This creates additional barriers for **rural women, ethnic minorities, and refugees**, who may face geographic isolation, limited administrative literacy, language barriers, or mistrust in institutions. Furthermore, entrepreneurship is often framed as a secondary activation tool rather than as a strategic pathway to sustainable economic empowerment.

### 3.1.2 National gender equality and social inclusive strategies

Strategic documents on gender equality and social inclusion provide an enabling policy environment but offer limited targeted support for women's entrepreneurship.

The **National Strategy for Promotion of Equality between Women and Men (2021–2030)**<sup>3</sup> recognises women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship as important policy objectives. Its horizontal approach is relevant to all IMPACTA target groups, particularly:

- **Mompreneurs**, through recognition of the need to reconcile work and family responsibilities;
- **Rural women and undereducated women**, through commitments to reducing territorial and social inequalities.

Nevertheless, the strategy does not include dedicated entrepreneurship instruments, earmarked funding, or binding implementation mechanisms. Its impact therefore depends largely on how gender equality objectives are integrated into sectoral policies and programmes at national and local levels.

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<sup>2</sup> Employment Promotion Act, <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/19/zaetost/employment-promotion-act.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Strategy for Promotion of Equality between Women and Men (2021–2030) <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/41/test/strategy2021-2030.pdf>

Social inclusion strategies targeting **ethnic minorities, refugees**, and other vulnerable groups (including Roma inclusion strategies and migration and integration frameworks) focus primarily on access to education, employment, housing, and social services. While these policies indirectly support labour market participation, entrepreneurship is rarely conceptualised as a distinct integration or empowerment pathway. As a result, their relevance for **women-led start-ups, self-employment, and social enterprises** emerging from these communities remains limited.

### 3.1.3 Strategic framework for innovation and economic transformation

The **Innovative Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Republic of Bulgaria (ISIS)<sup>4</sup> 2021–2027** provides the overarching strategic framework guiding public investment in innovation, research, and economic transformation. It identifies priority thematic areas such as information and communication technologies, mechatronics and microelectronics, bioeconomy and biotechnology, creative and cultural industries, and clean, circular, and low-carbon technologies.

ISIS is relevant for:

- **Women-led start-ups and SMEs** operating in innovation-driven and technology-enabled sectors;
- **Women-led social innovation initiatives**, particularly in circular economy, green services, and creative industries;
- **Female business angels and investors**, through the development of innovation ecosystems, clusters, and co-operation platforms.

However, ISIS functions primarily as a coordination and prioritisation instrument rather than a direct funding mechanism. It does not include gender-sensitive objectives, indicators, or targets, and its relevance for vulnerable groups, such as **rural women, undereducated women, mompreneurs, women in their silver ages, and refugees**, depends entirely on how its priorities are translated into operational programmes. As such, without complementary inclusion-oriented measures, the benefits of smart specialisation risk remaining concentrated among better-resourced entrepreneurs.

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<sup>4</sup> Innovative Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.mig.government.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/isis-2021-2027.pdf>

### 3.1.4 Operational programmes: skills, inclusion, competitiveness and innovation

The Operational Programme “Human Resources Development 2021-2027”<sup>5</sup> (HRDP) is the operational programme most closely aligned with the needs of vulnerable women and several IMPACTA target groups. It explicitly targets:

- **Young women, undereducated women, and long-term unemployed women;**
- **Rural women** and women from economically disadvantaged regions;
- **Women returning from maternity leave (“mompreneurs”);**
- **Women in their silver ages** seeking re-skilling, up-skilling, or re-integration.

The programme supports training, skills development, mentoring, counselling, and activation measures, which are critical for building foundational capacities relevant to entrepreneurship, including digital skills, financial literacy, employability, and confidence. These interventions are particularly important for women facing multiple labour-market barriers. However, entrepreneurship and business creation are often treated as secondary outcomes rather than as central objectives. HRDP measures rarely provide end-to-end entrepreneurial support, such as start-up financing, incubation, scaling, or long-term mentoring, limiting the programme’s capacity to fully support **women-led start-ups, social enterprises, and career-transition entrepreneurs.**

The Operational Programme “Competitiveness and Innovations in SMEs”<sup>6</sup> 2021-2027 is the main operational instrument supporting business competitiveness, innovation, digitalisation, and green transition. It is formally open to **women-led enterprises** and is particularly relevant for:

- **Women-led SMEs** seeking to modernise operations, introduce digital tools, or invest in sustainable technologies;
- **Women entrepreneurs engaged in social innovation**, where innovation and environmental components align with programme priorities;
- **Late-stage career changers** and **women in their silver ages** who already operate registered businesses.

In practice, the programme’s high administrative requirements, co-financing obligations, and emphasis on investment readiness limit accessibility for **micro-enterprises,**

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<sup>5</sup> Operational Programme “Human Resources Development 2021-2027”, [https://esf.bg/wps/portal/program-hrd/documents.ophrd/phrd/HRDP\\_SFC\\_v.1.8\\_BG%20final%20approved](https://esf.bg/wps/portal/program-hrd/documents.ophrd/phrd/HRDP_SFC_v.1.8_BG%20final%20approved)

<sup>6</sup> Operational Programme “Competitiveness and Innovations in SMEs 2021-2027”, [https://www.mig.government.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/nov-programen-period-2021-2027-g-30\\_ver.1.1.pdf](https://www.mig.government.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/nov-programen-period-2021-2027-g-30_ver.1.1.pdf)

undereducated women, mompreneurs, and early-stage entrepreneurs. The absence of gender-specific outreach or prioritisation further reduces participation by vulnerable groups.

The Operational Programme “Research, Innovation and Digitalisation for Smart Transformation” 2021-2027<sup>7</sup> supports advanced innovation ecosystems, research-business collaboration, and digital transformation. It is potentially relevant for:

- **Women-led innovative SMEs and start-ups** operating within smart specialisation sectors;
- **Female business angels and investors**, through participation in innovation networks and co-investment initiatives.

However, high entry thresholds related to technological maturity, research capacity, and consortium participation significantly restrict access. The programme currently has limited relevance for **rural women, undereducated women, mompreneurs, refugees, and social enterprises** operating outside high-tech sectors.

The **National Recovery and Resilience Plan<sup>8</sup> (NRRP)** addresses key structural barriers affecting women’s economic participation through investments in childcare infrastructure, social services, skills development, and digitalisation. Its measures are indirectly relevant for:

- **Mompreneurs** and women caregivers, by reducing unpaid care burdens and facilitating labour-market participation;
- **Rural women**, through improved access to services, connectivity, and digital tools.

Despite this enabling role, the NRRP includes limited direct support for women-led enterprises, start-ups, or self-employment initiatives. Its contribution to women’s entrepreneurship is therefore structural rather than catalytic.

### 3.1.5 Rural programmes: localised access to entrepreneurship support

Territorial and rural development instruments play a critical role in supporting women’s entrepreneurship in Bulgaria, particularly for target groups facing compounded barriers related to geography, limited access to services, lower educational attainment, and restricted financial capacity. Among all funding instruments analysed, rural and

<sup>7</sup> Operational Programme “Research, Innovation and Digitalisation for Smart Transformation” 2021-2027, [https://www.mig.government.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/pniidit\\_2021\\_2027\\_ver.1.1.pdf](https://www.mig.government.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/pniidit_2021_2027_ver.1.1.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> National Recovery and Resilience Plan, <https://nextgeneration.bg/14>

territorial programmes offer the most context-sensitive and locally adapted support mechanisms, making them especially relevant for **rural women, undereducated women, women-led microenterprises, and social entrepreneurs operating in disadvantaged areas.**

The **Programme for Rural Development<sup>9</sup> (PRD)** constitutes the principal national and EU-funded instrument supporting entrepreneurship in rural areas. While historically focused on agriculture, the programme has progressively expanded its scope to include **non-agricultural economic activities**, recognising the need for economic diversification and employment creation in rural regions.

For women entrepreneurs, the most relevant instruments under the PRD are the non-agricultural measures designed to stimulate micro and small business development:

- **Sub-measure 6.2 – Start-up support for non-agricultural activities**, which provides lump-sum financial support for the creation of micro and small businesses in rural areas. Eligible activities include services, crafts, tourism, care services, small-scale production, and other locally embedded economic activities. This measure is particularly accessible for **rural women, mompreneurs, women in their silver ages, and late-stage career changers**, as it supports relatively low-risk, small-scale business models that can be combined with family and care responsibilities.
- **Sub-measure 6.4 – Investments in support of non-agricultural activities**, which finances the expansion, diversification, and modernisation of existing rural businesses. Typical supported activities include guesthouses, tourism services, local transport, childcare and care-related services, small production facilities, and community-oriented enterprises. This measure is relevant for **women-led SMEs, family businesses, and women entrepreneurs engaged in social and community-based initiatives**, including social enterprises addressing local needs.

A key strength of rural entrepreneurship support lies in the implementation of PRD measures through the **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)<sup>10</sup>** approach, operationalised by **Local Action Groups (LAGs)**. LAGs bring together municipalities, businesses, civil society organisations, and local stakeholders to design and implement local development strategies tailored to specific territorial contexts.

For women entrepreneurs, the CLLD approach offers several comparative advantages:

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<sup>9</sup> Programme for Rural Development, <https://www.mzh.government.bg/bg/politiki-i-programi/programi-za-finansirane/programa-za-razvitie-na-selskite-rayoni/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mzh.government.bg/bg/politiki-i-programi/programi-za-finansirane/programa-za-razvitie-na-selskite-rayoni/vomr/>

- **Proximity and accessibility**, as information, application support, and communication are delivered locally;
- **Lower entry thresholds**, compared to national-level programmes, particularly for microbusinesses and first-time entrepreneurs;
- **Context-sensitive prioritisation**, allowing local strategies to address specific challenges such as depopulation, care service shortages, or lack of local employment opportunities;
- **Greater relevance for social innovation**, as LAG strategies often include measures supporting community services, social enterprises, and locally embedded solutions.

These characteristics make CLLD instruments particularly relevant for **rural women**, **ethnic minority women**, and **women with limited administrative capacity**, who are often excluded from more centralised and competitive funding schemes.

Despite their strong territorial relevance, rural and CLLD-based programmes face a number of persistent limitations. Administrative procedures remain complex, especially for women with limited experience in project-based funding. The quality and capacity of LAGs vary significantly across regions, leading to unequal access to information, support, and funding opportunities. Furthermore, funding under PRD measures is often **project-based and time-limited**, with limited integration of mentoring, business development services, or post-investment support.

Another structural gap concerns the weak linkage between rural entrepreneurship funding and broader innovation, digitalisation, and skills development programmes. While PRD measures support business creation and investment, they rarely include systematic components for **digital skills development**, **financial literacy**, **market access**, or **networking**, which are critical for business sustainability and growth. This gap is particularly significant for **women-led social enterprises** and **microbusinesses**, which require ongoing capacity-building rather than one-off financial support.

## Conclusion

The review of the regulatory and policy framework confirms that Bulgaria has established a comprehensive formal environment supporting gender equality, labour market participation, and entrepreneurship. The existing legislation, strategies, and funding programmes create multiple entry points for women's economic activity and are broadly aligned with EU priorities on inclusion, skills development, innovation, and territorial cohesion.

At the same time, the analysis highlights a persistent **gap between policy design and practical accessibility**. Support for women's entrepreneurship is predominantly indirect and gender-neutral, resulting in uneven outcomes across target groups. Women with stronger educational backgrounds, urban location, and existing business capacity benefit more consistently, while vulnerable and non-traditional entrepreneurs face structural barriers in accessing entrepreneurship support.

The framework is particularly effective in **skills development and labour market activation**, but less so in providing integrated pathways towards sustainable entrepreneurship. Innovation- and competitiveness-oriented instruments tend to have high entry thresholds, while rural and territorial programmes offer greater accessibility but remain limited in scope and long-term business support.

The findings underline the need for **better integration and targeting of existing instruments**, ensuring that skills development, mentoring, and funding are connected into coherent, gender-responsive pathways.

## 3.2 Situation of women entrepreneurs in Bulgaria

This chapter examines the socio-economic and labour market context shaping women's participation in entrepreneurship in Bulgaria. It draws on national statistical data, international comparative indicators, and analytical reports by international organisations, research institutions, and civil society actors, interviews taken by stakeholders from Bulgaria. The analysis focuses on structural patterns, disparities, and trends that influence women's entrepreneurial choices and outcomes, with particular attention to vulnerable and non-traditional groups targeted by the IMPACTA project.

### 3.2.1 Desk research data

The Republic of Bulgaria is a country located in South-eastern Europe. It is bordered by Romania to the north, Serbia and Republic of North Macedonia to the west, Greece and Turkey to the south, and the Black Sea to the east. The capital and largest city is Sofia; other major cities are Plovdiv, Varna and Burgas. With a territory of 110,994 square kilometres (42,855 sq mi), Bulgaria is Europe's 16th largest country.

Women in Bulgaria demonstrate relatively high levels of labour market participation compared to EU averages, yet significant structural and regional disparities persist. According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI), as of December 31, 2024, the

population of Bulgaria was 6 437 360 persons. Male population was 3 095 140 (48.1%) and female - 3 342 220 (51.9%)<sup>11</sup>.

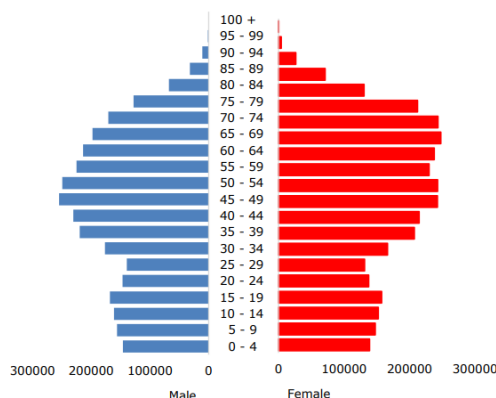


Figure 3-1: Age structure of the population as of 31.12.2024; NSI Population and Demographic processes - 2024

According to the latest available data, the female labour force participation rate is **70.3%** among women aged 15–64<sup>12</sup>. The employment rate for women in this age group stands at **68.1%**, corresponding to **1,331,100 employed women**<sup>13</sup>.

However, participation patterns vary significantly by **region, age, education level, and family status**. In several rural and economically disadvantaged regions, a substantial share of women remains inactive (*OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Bulgaria, 2025*). Young women face particular challenges: the **NEET rate among women aged 15–29 is 14.8%**, indicating difficulties in the transition from education to employment or entrepreneurship (*Eurostat, NEET by sex and age, 2024*). These challenges are especially pronounced for **undereducated women, ethnic minorities, and women in remote rural areas** (*Institute for Market Economics, Labour Market Integration of Women in Bulgaria, 2023*).

Women’s labour market trajectories are strongly affected by care responsibilities. The presence of children in a household is associated with lower employment rates for women, while it has the opposite effect for men (*OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Bulgaria, 2025*). Limited access to early childhood education and care services further constrains women’s economic participation: only 21.2% of children aged 0–3 attend formal childcare in Bulgaria (*Eurostat, Children in formal childcare,*

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.nsi.bg/en/file/28604/Population2024\\_en\\_F59F6N4.pdf](https://www.nsi.bg/en/file/28604/Population2024_en_F59F6N4.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> NSI, Labour Force Survey, Q3 2025, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/press-release/main-labour-force-survey-results-8847>

<sup>13</sup> NSI, Employed and employment rates, Q3 2025

2024). This situation particularly affects **mompreneurs** and women returning to work after maternity.

Despite relatively high employment rates, women in Bulgaria remain concentrated in a narrow range of sectors characterised by lower pay and limited career progression. The largest shares of employed women are found in **manufacturing, trade, education, healthcare, and social services**, with strong horizontal segregation across traditionally feminised occupations (*NSI, Employment by economic activity and sex, 2024; Institute for Market Economics, 2023*).

Gender pay disparities persist across most sectors. The **gender pay gap in Bulgaria stands at 13.1%**, with particularly pronounced differences in finance, healthcare, ICT, manufacturing, and cultural industries (*NSI, Gender Pay Gap, 2023*)<sup>14</sup>.

Unpaid work remains a major structural constraint. Women work more hours overall when paid and unpaid labour is combined, limiting their capacity to invest time in entrepreneurship, business growth, and skills development (*Bulgarian Platform of the European Women's Lobby, Pay and Gender Equality in Bulgaria, 2024*). This burden is particularly heavy for **rural women** and **women caregivers**.

Women's participation in entrepreneurship in Bulgaria remains below parity with men and is characterised by smaller business size, lower growth rates, and limited access to leadership positions. Women account for approximately **39% of the self-employed**, depending on the indicator used (*NSI, Self-employed by sex, 2025*)<sup>15</sup>. At the firm level, women's presence in ownership and management structures remains comparatively low. Women participate in the ownership structure of **30% of firms in Bulgaria**, while only **24% of firms** report female participation in top management positions (*World Bank, Enterprise Surveys: Bulgaria, 2023*).

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nsi.bg/en/statistical-data/172/554>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nsi.bg/en/statistical-data/169/547>

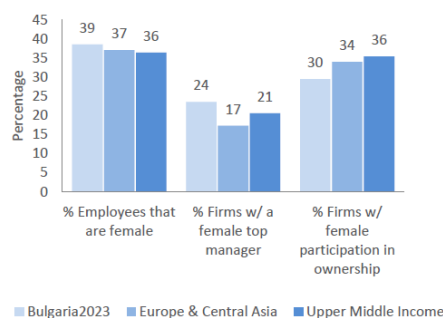


Figure 3-2: Female participation in employment, top management and ownership, World Bank, Enterprise Surveys: Bulgaria, 2023

Female-led businesses are more likely to be **micro and small enterprises, younger firms,** and concentrated in **services, trade, and professional activities** (*RAPIV, National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis: Bulgaria, 2024*)<sup>16</sup>. Business survival data indicate that only **58.1% of enterprises established in 2020** were still active after three years (*NSI, Business Demography, 2023*)<sup>17</sup>. This structural fragility disproportionately affects **women-led microenterprises, young women entrepreneurs, and women-led social enterprises.**

Across national and international studies, several recurring barriers to women’s entrepreneurship in Bulgaria are consistently identified.

**Access to finance** is the most significant obstacle. Women entrepreneurs rely predominantly on personal savings, family support, or informal funding, while access to bank loans and investment capital remains limited due to lack of collateral, high interest rates, and risk-averse lending practices (*RAPIV, National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis, 2024; RAPIV, RE-FEM Country Report – Bulgaria*<sup>18</sup>, 2023; *OECD, Inclusive Entrepreneurship Policy Country Notes: Bulgaria, 2024-2025*).

**Skills and information gaps** are also critical. Many women report insufficient knowledge related to business start-up procedures, access to funding opportunities, digitalisation, and the application of circular economy principles (*RAPIV, National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis, 2024*).

Time constraints linked to unpaid care work and daily business survival tasks further restrict participation in training and mentoring, particularly for **mompreneurs, undereducated women, and women managing microenterprises** (*Bulgarian Platform of the European Women’s Lobby, Pay and Gender Equality in Bulgaria, 2024*).

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.rapiv.org/files/National%20Report%20Skills%20Needs%20and%20Gaps%20WE\(2\).pdf](https://www.rapiv.org/files/National%20Report%20Skills%20Needs%20and%20Gaps%20WE(2).pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [https://old.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/BDE2023\\_en\\_9I9QE72.pdf](https://old.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/BDE2023_en_9I9QE72.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.rapiv.org/files/RAPIV%20Country%20Report%20Bulgaria.pdf>

In addition, “soft barriers” such as uncertainty, fear of failure, and concerns about work-life balance are frequently reported, especially among **young women** and **first-time entrepreneurs**.

Social innovation and social entrepreneurship in Bulgaria represent an emerging but still underdeveloped segment of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, with growing relevance for women entrepreneurs, particularly those from vulnerable groups. Social enterprises and socially innovative initiatives often serve as entry points to entrepreneurship for women motivated by social impact, community needs, and inclusive development rather than profit maximisation alone.

Available research indicates that the **social entrepreneurship sector in Bulgaria remains relatively young and small**, with the majority of social enterprises operating at pre-launch, start-up, or early development stages (*Academy for Active Youth, “Youth & Social Entrepreneurship in Bulgaria – Country Report”, Socially Agile Project, 2023<sup>19</sup>*). The average time required for social enterprises to reach operational stability is estimated at **3-4 years**, and most initiatives initially rely on **grant funding, donations, or project-based financing**, rather than market-based revenues.

Women play a significant role in social entrepreneurship, particularly in areas such as **social services, education, care, community development, culture, and environmental initiatives**. These sectors align closely with women’s existing labour market participation patterns and care-related roles, making social entrepreneurship a natural extension of women’s economic and civic engagement (*DIESIS Network, “Country Report of the Mapping European Social Economy (MESMER+) – Bulgaria”, 2023<sup>20</sup>*; *Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “Entrepreneurship for NGOs 2023: Key Findings”, 2023<sup>21</sup>*). At the same time, this concentration reinforces structural challenges related to low profitability, limited access to finance, and reliance on unstable funding sources.

A major structural constraint for social innovation in Bulgaria is the **lack of a clear, supportive, and comprehensive legal and policy framework**. Although social enterprises operate under various legal forms - associations, foundations, cooperatives, specialised enterprises for people with disabilities, and community cultural centres - the absence of a unified and functional definition limits visibility, access to finance, and eligibility for support measures (*Institute for Social and Trade Union Research, Education and Training – ISTURET Bulgaria, “Social Economy and Its Visibility and Representation in*

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<sup>19</sup> <https://sociallyagile.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Bulgary-Report.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.diesis.coop/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Yuliya-Simeonova-MESMER-ISTURET-BG.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.diesis.coop/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Yuliya-Simeonova-MESMER-ISTURET-BG.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>21</sup> <https://bcnl.org/uploadfiles/documents/bcni-report-social-entpreneurship%202023.pdf>

*National Industrial Relations System in Bulgaria”, MESMER+ Project, 2023*). As a result, many emerging social enterprises refrain from registering or branding themselves explicitly as “social” due to perceived stigma or administrative barriers (*UniCredit Bulbank/ Valley of Growth Research Team, “Social Entrepreneurship in Bulgaria: On the Path to Growth”, 2023<sup>22</sup>*).

Access to finance constitutes one of the most critical barriers for women-led social enterprises. Research shows that social enterprises rarely apply for bank financing due to low confidence in their ability to service loans, seasonality of activities, low liquidity, and insufficient financial planning capacity (*UniCredit Bulbank/ Valley of Growth Research Team, “Social Entrepreneurship in Bulgaria: On the Path to Growth”, 2023*). These challenges disproportionately affect **women-led social enterprises**, which often operate at smaller scales and prioritise social impact over financial accumulation.

Skills gaps further constrain the development of women-led social innovation initiatives. While motivation and commitment to social impact are strong, many social entrepreneurs report limited competencies in **business planning, financial management, impact measurement, market access, and scaling strategies** (*Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law, “Entrepreneurship for NGOs 2023: Key Findings”, 2023; PULSE, Empow’Her, Reach for Change et al., “Fostering Women Social Entrepreneurship (FoWoSE) Programme Report”, Erasmus+, 2023<sup>23</sup>*). Difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled staff are also common, as social enterprises are typically unable to offer competitive wages, leading to reliance on volunteer labour or short-term project staff.

Despite these challenges, social innovation holds significant potential for **inclusive entrepreneurship**, particularly for **women from vulnerable groups**, including undereducated women, rural women, ethnic minorities, refugees, and women returning to the labour market after extended care periods. Social enterprises often address unmet local needs and contribute to employment creation in disadvantaged regions, compensating for gaps in public service provision and local labour markets.

It could be concluded, that the analysis shows that women in Bulgaria are well represented in the labour market and are actively involved in entrepreneurship. However, their participation is uneven and strongly influenced by structural factors such as care responsibilities, sectoral segregation, and regional disparities. Women

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[https://valleyofgrowth.reachforchange.org/static/pdf/valleyofgrowth/UCB\\_ValleyOfGrowth\\_Doklad\\_BG\\_210x210\\_03.pdf](https://valleyofgrowth.reachforchange.org/static/pdf/valleyofgrowth/UCB_ValleyOfGrowth_Doklad_BG_210x210_03.pdf)

23 [https://when.org.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FoWoSE\\_PR3\\_FINAL\\_VERSION\\_ENGLISH\\_3107.pdf](https://when.org.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FoWoSE_PR3_FINAL_VERSION_ENGLISH_3107.pdf)

entrepreneurs are more likely to operate micro and small businesses with limited growth potential and lower resilience to economic shocks.

Vulnerable groups of women, including rural women, undereducated women, young women, mompreneurs, ethnic minorities, refugees, and women engaged in social entrepreneurship, face additional barriers that restrict their access to resources, finance, skills development, and support networks. These barriers affect both the decision to start a business and the ability to sustain and develop it over time.

Social innovation represents an important pathway for women's entrepreneurship, particularly in addressing local needs and social challenges. Despite strong motivation and community relevance, women-led social enterprises remain constrained by limited financial sustainability, skills gaps, and insufficient policy recognition.

### 3.2.2 Reporting interviews

#### Interviewee profile

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The qualitative component of the needs assessment included a series of semi-structured expert interviews conducted with professionals actively engaged in the fields of entrepreneurship support, social innovation, investment, mentoring, and business development in Bulgaria. The interviews complement the desk research findings presented from the previous sub-chapter and provide practice-based insights into the barriers, needs, and structural gaps affecting women entrepreneurs, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds.

The interviewees hold senior and decision-making positions within financial institutions, private consultancy companies, angel investment networks, universities, entrepreneurship development centres and non-governmental organisations. Some are responsible for designing and implementing dedicated programmes for women entrepreneurs within the financial sector, others manage consultancy firms specialising in European projects, financial modelling and business planning for micro, small and medium enterprises. The sample also includes representatives of the angel investment community who are directly involved in screening start-ups, preparing founders for pitching, and facilitating access to private capital. Academic experts and programme developers contribute experience in entrepreneurship education and structured training programmes, while NGO-based mentors bring extensive expertise in social innovation and work with vulnerable groups, including mompreneurs, women from rural areas, migrants and women survivors of violence.

The **areas of expertise covered by the interviewees** span women's entrepreneurship, labour market integration, social innovation, start-up acceleration, investment readiness, mentoring methodologies and financial literacy. Several of them have developed and implemented specialised mentoring schemes and training pathways that combine soft skills development with financial and strategic business competencies. Others operate at the intersection of entrepreneurship and investment, offering insights into how women-led businesses are perceived within funding environments and how investment decisions are made. NGO representatives contribute experience in designing programmes that integrate social entrepreneurship with empowerment and community development approaches.

The **professional experience of the interviewees** ranges from more than a decade to over 25 years in entrepreneurship, finance, mentoring and social enterprise development. Some bring more than twenty years of combined corporate and non-governmental sector experience, including international consulting and programme implementation. Others have accumulated over 10 years of hands-on experience in financial consulting and business modelling for start-ups. Representatives of the angel investment ecosystem report having reviewed or worked with hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of start-ups over a period of several years. This depth of experience ensures that the insights shared during the interviews reflect structural and systemic patterns rather than short-term observations.

**All interviewees maintain direct professional engagement with women entrepreneurs.**

This engagement includes the development of dedicated financial products with adapted conditions for women-led businesses, the coordination of training and mentoring programmes targeting women from rural areas and refugee backgrounds, the mentoring of cohorts composed predominantly or exclusively of women founders, and the provision of business planning and financial guidance to women-led microenterprises. NGO experts further contribute experience in supporting women from marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, migrant women and women who have experienced domestic violence. Several interviewees emphasise long-term mentoring relationships rather than short-term advisory sessions, highlighting the importance of sustained guidance over multiple years.

The **rationale for including these experts in the sample** lies in their complementary positions within the entrepreneurial ecosystem and their direct exposure to both mainstream and vulnerable groups of women entrepreneurs. Together, they provide perspectives from the financial sector, the investment community, academic institutions, consultancy practice and civil society. This diversity allows for a

comprehensive understanding of ecosystem gaps, particularly in relation to access to finance, skills development, mentoring quality, institutional navigation and social innovation support. Their combined insights contribute to a nuanced analysis of the environment in which women entrepreneurs in Bulgaria, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, attempt to establish and sustain their businesses.

## Main findings

### RQ1. Conceptualising Entrepreneurship as Social Innovation

Across the interviews, social innovation is understood as the **development of new or improved solutions that address concrete social problems in a sustainable and inclusive way**. Rather than being treated as a purely theoretical concept, it is framed as a practical response to gaps left by the market or public systems, often emerging from real community needs. From the NGO and mentoring perspective, social innovation prioritises social impact while maintaining financial viability, combining social purpose with business logic.

Women's entrepreneurship is frequently perceived as closely linked to social innovation, particularly because many women founders identify problems related to care, education, wellbeing, food, culture or sustainability and design businesses around them. Interviewees emphasise the added social value created beyond economic outcomes, including empowerment, increased confidence, role modelling and local community impact. In this sense, entrepreneurship is not only a source of income but also a vehicle for inclusion and social change.

Several experts additionally underline that women are strongly represented in social innovation domains such as healthcare, education, sustainable food production, green economy and circular economy. However, a recurring challenge concerns the long-term financial sustainability of these initiatives. While motivation for social impact is strong, ensuring economic viability and scaling capacity remains a structural constraint for many women-led social enterprises.

At the same time, several experts draw a clear distinction between market-driven entrepreneurship and socially oriented approaches. Within the investment ecosystem, decisions are based primarily on scalability and return, and social projects are perceived as more difficult to finance through traditional angel investment models. One interviewee notes that *"a business is a business when you have an Excel table; before that it's an emotion,"* underlining the need for financial clarity even in mission-driven initiatives.

Entrepreneurship is also framed as a response to structural labour market barriers affecting disadvantaged women, including refugees, rural women and women with care responsibilities. In contexts where access to stable employment is limited, business creation is described as a pathway to economic autonomy and integration. Innovative elements from a social perspective include adapted financial products, long-term mentoring models, and community-based support structures that reflect women's real-life constraints and promote peer learning.

From the academic perspective, universities are also described as important institutional platforms for fostering women's entrepreneurship and social innovation, by connecting students, public institutions and the entrepreneurial ecosystem through dedicated centres and partnership-based initiatives.

### RQ1.1. Entrepreneurship vs. Traditional Labour Market Integration Approaches

In the interviews, **entrepreneurship is clearly described as different from traditional labour market integration measures.** Traditional approaches usually focus on helping people find a job through training, subsidised employment, or activation programmes. The goal is to place individuals into existing positions within the labour market. These measures are often standardised and organised by public institutions.

Entrepreneurship follows a different logic. Instead of preparing women to enter an existing job, it allows them to create their own economic activity. Interviewees explain that this gives women more control over their work and working conditions. In this sense, entrepreneurship is seen as more flexible. This flexibility is considered particularly important in situations where access to regular employment is limited, such as in rural areas or in the case of refugee women.

The interviews show that entrepreneurship is not seen as a replacement for traditional employment policies. **It is more often described as a parallel or complementary pathway.** For example, training and mentoring programmes can prepare women for employment, but they can also support women who want to start a business. When entrepreneurship support is combined with structured guidance and mentoring, it can extend the impact of traditional labour market measures.

Entrepreneurship is viewed as particularly suitable for women who are motivated to take initiative and who want greater independence. It is not presented as the right solution for everyone. Interviewees explain that starting a business requires commitment and readiness. For some women, especially those who have limited access to standard employment opportunities, entrepreneurship can become a realistic

option. In these cases, it functions as an additional pathway toward economic participation rather than a last resort.

## RQ1.2. Mechanism and processes of impact

The interviews show that entrepreneurship supports women's labour market integration through several interconnected mechanisms. First, **business creation functions as a strong driver of skills development**. Women who start a business are required to learn financial planning, pricing, cost calculation, marketing, negotiation and digital communication. This learning process often happens in practice and accelerates the development of both technical and soft skills. Experts highlight that financial literacy in particular is a transformative element. When women understand costs, margins and revenue flows, they gain greater control over their decisions and long-term planning. Digital competences are identified as increasingly critical in this process. Challenges related to building an online presence, applying digital marketing strategies, using analytical tools and integrating artificial intelligence in small business management were highlighted as factors limiting competitiveness. Insufficient digital confidence often results in outsourcing services, increasing operational costs and reducing autonomy.

A second key mechanism is **autonomy**. Entrepreneurship allows women to structure their work around their personal and family responsibilities. This **flexibility** is described as especially relevant for mothers and women with care duties. In some cases, financial institutions have even adapted products to reflect maternity realities, which reduces perceived risk and increases confidence in starting a business. Autonomy is therefore not only about independence from employers but also about designing working conditions that reflect real-life constraints.

**Confidence-building** is another central process. Several interviewees explain that many women initially doubt their capacity to manage a business or to interact with investors and institutions. Long-term mentoring plays a decisive role here. Through repeated feedback, structured guidance and practical problem-solving, women gradually develop stronger self-belief and decision-making capacity. Mentoring relationships that last beyond a single training cycle are described as particularly effective in reinforcing this process.

**Access to networks and communities** also emerges as a powerful mechanism. Entrepreneurship programmes often create peer groups in which women exchange experiences, collaborate and sometimes form partnerships. This reduces isolation and expands professional contacts. In regional contexts, where access to business networks

may be limited, such community-building is seen as essential for both emotional support and practical opportunities.

**The role of the support ecosystem** is repeatedly emphasised. Entrepreneurship does not function in isolation. Effective support **includes mentoring, structured training, financial instruments adapted to women-led businesses, and access to investment or microfinance.** Interviewees underline that fragmented or short-term interventions are less effective. Integrated support models that combine training, financial guidance and long-term mentoring are considered more successful in leading to sustainable outcomes. Institutionalised support structures, such as university-based centres for women's entrepreneurship, are identified as providing continuity beyond project cycles and strengthening cooperation between academia, business and public stakeholders.

In terms of **impact**, entrepreneurship is described as strengthening economic stability when the business reaches a viable stage. Even when enterprises remain small, they can generate stable income and reduce dependence on temporary employment or social assistance. In addition, the skills acquired through entrepreneurship increase overall employability. Women who have managed a business often develop organisational, communication and financial competencies that remain valuable even if they later move into paid employment.

Across the interviews, certain support **elements are consistently identified as critical** for success. These include financial literacy training, realistic business planning, long-term mentoring relationships, access to finance under adapted conditions, and participation in professional networks.

### **RQ1.3. Needs and barriers of women entrepreneurs with disadvantaged backgrounds**

The interviews reveal that women entrepreneurs with disadvantaged backgrounds face a combination of external and individual barriers that often reinforce each other. These barriers appear both at the stage of starting a business and in the effort to sustain it over time.

External barriers are most frequently linked to **access to finance and institutional frameworks.** Experts consistently emphasise that women, particularly those without assets or stable income history, have limited access to credit and investment. This challenge is even more pronounced for refugee women, who face legal and banking restrictions that make formal financing almost inaccessible. Administrative complexity also plays a role. Registration procedures, tax obligations and compliance requirements

are perceived as difficult to navigate, especially for women with limited prior exposure to business regulation.

**Care responsibilities** represent another persistent external challenge. Women often carry the main burden of childcare and unpaid work, which reduces the time and energy available for business development. In contexts where childcare services are limited or unaffordable, entrepreneurship must be combined with care duties, increasing stress and slowing growth. This barrier is systemic because it reflects broader social norms and service gaps rather than individual shortcomings.

At the individual level, interviewees identify **skills gaps as a key barrier**. Financial literacy, pricing strategies, digital marketing and understanding of investment logic are areas where many women lack confidence and formal knowledge.

**Self-confidence** is frequently mentioned as a barrier. Some women hesitate to position themselves as entrepreneurs or to present their ideas to investors and institutions. Mentors observe that women may take critical feedback more personally, which can affect their willingness to engage in competitive business environments.

**Risk exposure** is also higher for disadvantaged women because they often rely on personal savings and lack financial buffers.

**Migration background** introduces **language difficulties, unfamiliarity with local regulations and limited access to networks**.

**Rural** context limits exposure to **professional communities, investors and innovation ecosystems**.

Age can function both as an asset and a barrier. **Women over 50** may have experience and networks, but may **lack digital skills or feel excluded from innovation-focused programmes**. **Younger women** may have ideas and digital familiarity **but limited practical or financial experience**.

Experts **identify several tailored support needs**. Long-term mentoring is repeatedly described as essential, especially when it combines practical business advice with confidence-building. Financial instruments with adapted conditions are also considered necessary, particularly for women without collateral. In addition, there is a strong need for clear and accessible information about administrative procedures, funding opportunities and legal requirements. Peer networks and structured communities are viewed as important for reducing isolation and supporting team formation.

While **policies exist that support small businesses and labour market** activation, they are often fragmented and not specifically tailored to the realities of disadvantaged

women. Financing schemes may require co-financing or collateral that many women cannot provide. Training programmes may offer short-term courses but lack long-term mentoring or follow-up support.

The interviews suggest that **the most unmet needs concern integrated support pathways. Women with disadvantaged backgrounds require coordinated measures that combine financial access, skills development, mentoring, and institutional navigation.**

### Good practices and promising approaches

The interviews highlight several concrete initiatives and programme models that are considered successful in supporting women entrepreneurs, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

One of the most frequently mentioned examples is the **Smart Lady Programme**, implemented by a commercial bank in Bulgaria. This initiative supported more than 1000 women in the past 9 years. It combines dedicated financial products for women entrepreneurs with mentoring and training components. It includes adapted loan conditions, maternity-sensitive provisions and, in later stages, the creation of the **Sustainable Lady Fund**, which provides grant support for women-led projects in the field of sustainability. The key success factor is the integration of finance with mentoring and skills development. Similar initiative is a project implemented under UNHCR with involvement of Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry for support of refugee women mainly from Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine to start a business in Bulgaria. They receive special training and mentoring support.

Another example comes from structured entrepreneurship education and mentoring initiatives developed by the **Bulgarian Centre for Entrepreneurship (BEC)** and USA University for establishment of MOBI entrepreneurship programme.

In addition, university-based **Women Entrepreneurship Centre** established under transnational projects in the Danube region is highlighted as sustainable institutional model. The centre functions as long-term platforms connecting academia, business, public institutions and women entrepreneurs, ensuring continuity beyond individual project cycles.

Projects such as **WE.Circular** are also identified as relevant examples, as they focus on strengthening women's digital and green competences, particularly in relation to circular economy and sustainable business models. These initiatives demonstrate the importance of integrating environmental sustainability and digital transformation into women's entrepreneurship support.

Another good practice could be mentioned as **AWE programme** implemented on the territory of Varna region by Smart Varna. They have included refugee women and women from rural areas. Their strength lies in combining practical training with networking and team formation, which has led to business creation and increased entrepreneurial confidence. These programmes guide participants through idea validation, business model development and peer feedback over several weeks.

Within the investment ecosystem, mentoring and pitching preparation initiatives organised in collaboration with the angel investment community and networks such as **Unicorn.bg** are identified as promising practices. These programmes prepare women founders to present their projects to investors, strengthening financial literacy, understanding of scalability and strategic thinking. Even when direct investment is not secured, participants gain valuable exposure to real market expectations and professional feedback.

NGO-led mentoring models, including structured programmes focused on social entrepreneurship and vulnerable groups, are also considered effective. These initiatives typically combine regular mentoring sessions, peer learning, and access to practical tools. They target women from disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrant women and women facing social exclusion, and focus not only on business sustainability but also on empowerment and community inclusion.

Across these good practices, several common success factors emerge. Integrated support that combines finance, mentoring and training is more effective than isolated interventions. Long-term engagement builds confidence and business resilience. Community-building and peer networks reduce isolation. Tailored conditions that reflect women's life circumstances increase accessibility and retention.

For the IMPACTA Toolkit, these examples are directly relevant. They show that successful support for women entrepreneurs requires structured mentoring pathways, practical financial tools, adapted financial instruments and strong peer communities. Incorporating these elements into the Toolkit can help create an integrated model tailored to women with disadvantaged backgrounds.

## IMPACTA Toolkit

The interviews provide clear guidance on the **types of support that should be prioritised within the IMPACTA Toolkit**. Experts consistently emphasise that women from disadvantaged backgrounds need **structured, practical and long-term support** rather than isolated training sessions. The Toolkit should therefore prioritise integrated

pathways that combine financial literacy, mentoring, business modelling and confidence-building.

**Financial literacy emerges as a top priority.** Several interviewees underline that many women have strong ideas but lack clarity about pricing, costs, margins and cash flow management. The Toolkit should include simplified financial planning tools, step-by-step budget templates and guidance on how to calculate the real value of one's work. Practical tools such as simplified business model canvases, six-month financial planning sheets and revenue–cost tracking templates would directly address this need.

Experts also stress the importance of **modules addressing administrative navigation and institutional literacy.** Many women are discouraged by complex procedures and unclear regulatory requirements. The Toolkit could therefore include simplified explanations of business registration steps, tax obligations and available funding schemes, presented in accessible language.

In addition, **digital skills and practical use of technology** should be incorporated. Interviewees mention the need to strengthen women's capacity to use digital tools and online presence effectively, particularly in rural contexts. A thematic module on digital marketing, online sales and basic AI-supported tools would be relevant.

There is also a strong recommendation to include **modules on sustainable and green business models, circular economy principles and environmentally responsible entrepreneurship,** reflecting the growing relevance of green transition policies and market opportunities.

**Self-confidence and motivation** are repeatedly identified as central success factors. Several experts observe that many women hesitate to position themselves as entrepreneurs, underestimate their capacities, or internalise fear of failure. The Toolkit should therefore contain dedicated modules on confidence-building, mindset development and resilience. Suggested elements could include self-assessment exercises, reflection questions, role model stories, tools for dealing with critical feedback, and practical exercises for presenting ideas with clarity. Motivation-building components, such as goal-setting templates and progress-tracking tools, would also strengthen persistence and long-term engagement.

**Community-building and networking mechanisms** are also identified as essential. Women often lack access to professional networks, especially in rural areas or when coming from migrant backgrounds. The Toolkit could include methods for creating local peer groups, networking events and collaborative exercises that encourage partnership formation and mutual support.

**Long-term mentoring is another critical element.** Experts highlight that sustainable impact comes from continuous engagement rather than short-term courses. The Toolkit should therefore include guidance on how to structure mentoring relationships, define expectations between mentors and mentees, and organise peer-learning groups. It should also propose formats for regular case-based sessions where real business challenges are discussed.

Methodologically, it is recommended that the Toolkit be modular and flexible, allowing both self-directed use and integration into structured training programmes. Suggested formats include video-based learning, practical demonstrations, checklists, self-diagnostic tools and real-life case studies of women entrepreneurs.

The main gap in existing support is fragmentation. Current programmes often provide training, finance or mentoring separately. There is rarely a coherent pathway that connects these elements into a continuous support journey. The Toolkit can address this gap by **proposing an integrated model that combines financial tools, mentoring structures, peer learning and institutional guidance into a single, user-friendly framework tailored to women with disadvantaged backgrounds.**

### Policy and advocacy insights

The interviews generate a set of consistent recommendations directed at policymakers, support organisations and investors. These recommendations focus on improving structural conditions rather than only expanding individual-level training.

**Finance and investment** emerge as the most urgent policy area. Experts stress the need for more accessible and flexible financial instruments for women entrepreneurs, especially those without collateral or credit history. Refugee women are highlighted as particularly excluded from formal banking and public funding schemes due to legal and procedural barriers.

Interviewees recommend targeted microfinance instruments, blended finance models that combine grants and loans, and simplified access criteria for early-stage entrepreneurs. From the investment perspective, there is also a call for clearer preparation pathways so that women can better understand investor expectations and financial structuring. Some experts underline the importance of creating incentives for investors to support early-stage or socially oriented businesses. There is also emphasis on the need for dedicated financial incentives supporting green and social innovation initiatives led by women, including targeted schemes for circular economy and sustainability-oriented enterprises.

Regarding **care infrastructure**, interviewees emphasise that lack of accessible childcare remains a serious barrier that limits women's economic participation. Policymakers are encouraged to integrate childcare support into entrepreneurship and employment programmes. Flexible and community-based care services are seen as necessary conditions for enabling sustainable business activity.

Experts further stress that **work-life balance policies** should be explicitly integrated into entrepreneurship support frameworks, recognising that flexible support mechanisms and care-sensitive funding models are critical for women entrepreneurs.

In the field of **education and skills**, experts recommend practical and modular entrepreneurship education focused on financial literacy, digital skills and real business cases rather than theoretical content. Long-term mentoring should be supported as a standard component of entrepreneurship programmes. There is also a call to strengthen digital competencies, including the effective use of online tools and emerging technologies, particularly for women in rural areas.

Universities and educational institutions are identified as key strategic actors in this field. Recommendations include the establishment and long-term funding of university-based centres for entrepreneurship and innovation, the development of structured mentor networks involving the business sector, and the promotion of transnational cooperation and exchange of good practices within the Danube region and beyond.

With respect to **regulation and administrative burden**, interviewees highlight the need for simplification and clearer guidance. Complex procedures, unclear tax obligations and fragmented information discourage formalisation and scaling. Policymakers are encouraged to develop more accessible "one-stop-shop" models and simplified explanations of regulatory requirements.

On **representation and participation**, experts underline that women entrepreneurs, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, should be more actively involved in policy consultations and advisory structures. Policies are often designed without direct input from affected groups, which limits effectiveness. Strengthening women's networks and ensuring their participation in decision-making bodies is seen as essential for creating responsive support systems.

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