

WOMEN EDUCATION AND
STRATEGIC APPROACH TO
TRAINING!

Policy Recommendations



This publication "Policy Recommendations" was created in the framework of the Erasmus+ Project "Women Education and Strategic Approach to training! (WE Start!)" with reference number 2018-1-IT01-KA202-006786, (August 2018 - August 2021)



The project is a partnership of the following organisations:

Accademia Nuovi Studi Internazionali (Coordinator) - Italy [<http://www.accademianuovistudi.it/>]

Dedalus Cooperative Sociale - Italy [<http://www.coopdedalus.it/>]

Studio Erresse - Italy [<http://www.studioerresse.it/>]

Asociația pentru Educație și Dezvoltare Durabilă - Romania [<http://www.aesd.ro/>]

Volkshochschule im Landkreis Cham e.V. - Germany [<http://www.vhs-cham.de/>]

lernraum.wien (VHS Wien) - Austria [<https://www.vhs.at/de/e/lernraum-wien>]

CARDET - Cyprus [<http://www.cardet.org/>]

Dafni Kek - Greece [<http://www.kekdafni.gr/>]

Project information:

Information on the project is available at:

<https://westart-project.eu/>

<https://socialplatform.westart-project.eu/en/>

<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplu-project-details/#project/2018-1-IT01-KA202-006786>

and the websites of the project partners



This publication was created in the framework of the Erasmus+ Project "Women Education and Strategic Approach to training! " with reference number 2018-1-IT01-KA202-006786, under the monitoring of INAPP (Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche) in Italy.



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Introduction

Project WE START! – Women Education and Strategic Approach for Training, Erasmus+ project sets as its objective to help recognize and reduce gender bias, stereotypes and inequality, through supporting access to the initial and continuing training for women that have been systematically excluded. The institutions participating in WE START! are representative of 6 European countries: Italy, Greece, Romania, Austria, Germany and Cyprus.

Project coordinator is **A.N.S.I.** (IT) training body accredited by the Puglia Region, engaged in the creation of paths aimed at young people (NEET), unemployed adults and women.

The consortium is consisted of:

- **DEDALUS** (IT) cooperative expert in projects and services aimed at young migrants and women ROM;
- **STUDIO ERRESSE** (IT) cooperative company that deals with monitoring, evaluation and consulting for third sector organizations, companies and public administration; research, orientation and assessment of skills;
- **AESD** (RO) organization engaged in the implementation of digital training activities (distance learning) for adults with various levels of difficulty;
- **DAFNI KEK** (GR) is an organisation involved in adult education learning activities and counselling, providing open educational material and workshops, focusing on social and labour inclusion;
- **VHS im Lkrs. CHAM, e.V.** (DE) partners with extensive experience in training for adult learners, including women with migration background in the field of development of professional and social skills;
- **VHS WIEN** (AT) local provider of adult education, which runs numerous projects to give perspectives to young people (learning aid projects or youth coaching) to prevent them from leaving the educational process prematurely. People who have already made their way through school can make up for their educational qualifications at low cost or take part in further training programs that strengthen their position on the job market
- **CARDET** (CY) research and technological development centre working in synergy with local, national and international institutions, universities including Yale and the International Council of Educational Media.

The project promote the social inclusion and active participation of women identified as targets, meaning women aged 25-40 years including: European, non-European women, stateless, refugees, nomads, single mothers, women subject to family/ religious ties, women from rural areas, and / or looking for a new job at their first experience of professional training or continuing education. Each partner includes at least 25 beneficiaries and 5 professionals for each partner organization in the realization of the project (for a total of 180 participants during in-depth seminars, the local working groups and the phasing test).

The tools produced to achieve this objective also aim to increase the discussion at the territorial, regional, national and European level on issues of lifelong learning and continuing education, with particular attention to those who are still excluded, involving various stakeholders.

The achievement of these objectives will take place through the realization of the 4 Outputs of the project: a Guide to innovative technological methodologies and tools for social inclusion of women; a Social Learning Platform that can be used and available on digital devices; a Toolkit of E-Assessment - Self-assessment, Peer-assessment- able to measure the skills (basic and transversal) of the target women; a Policy Paper which aims to provide suggestions and recommendations to policy-makers.

This policy paper contains indications and suggestions regarding the social inclusion of target women through: increasing levels of their active participation; easier access to vocational training and fewer gender differences in relation to ICT.

The indications and suggestions are the result of the experimentation of innovative tools, created and tested during the three years of the WE START! project. Part of the project was carried out during the health emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in these circumstances the potential of guidance and remote support for the growth of skills emerged clearly, as well as the need to invest on these issues.

Which women do we intend to address?

WE START! intends to give an occasion of inclusion to women at risk of being marginalized, not only with respect to the labour market but also with respect to access to human and citizenship rights.

The forms of marginalization suffered by women in Europe are numerous and different. Based on relevant literature, marginalisation of groups of people is described[1] as

"different groups of people within a given culture, context and history at risk of being subjected to multiple discrimination due to the interplay of different characteristics or grounds, such as sex, gender, age, ethnicity, religion or belief, health status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, education or income, or living in various geographic localities. Belonging to such groups or even being perceived to belong to them, heightens the risk of inequalities in terms of access to rights and use of services and goods in a variety of domains, such as access to education, employment, health, social and housing assistance, protection against domestic or institutional violence, and justice."

Among the countries involved in the project, there are differences concerning, above all, the more or less numerous presence and typology of asylum seekers or refugees, immigrants or Roma; the presence of rural areas, the consistency of the local labour market and the system of norms and services for women.

[1] □Information provided by European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) – Treaty bodies, through the glossary of the “European Institute for Gender Equality – EIGE”:<https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1280>

Women in general still face discrimination since patriarchal standards are still present despite being challenged.

Especially affected by these discriminations are women that come from unprivileged socio-economic backgrounds or rural areas, are migrants/refugees or are natives belonging to a different ethnic or cultural group, have experienced trafficking (or still are) or/and are victims of gender-based violence, have grown up with no parents, are single mothers, for their sexual identity and sexual orientation (especially in the case of trans women) and for any other possible diversity factor.

Women that have (or are perceived to have) one or more of the above mentioned characteristics, face increased risk of marginalisation, especially as they grow older. Their marginalisation in most cases is expressed through their limited access to employment which leads to their poverty. They also are more excluded from places and decision-making processes; have less qualified jobs (even if they have high qualifications as is the case with many migrant women), find it difficult to keep a job or improve their skills if they have children.

Things have changed considerably compared to previous decades but still women face a lot of unemployment and dependence rates, or are very likely to have unofficial work and fall victims of sexual assault much more often than their male counterparts.

On a general note, the condition of many EU and non-EU women living in Europe is influenced by the sum of several exclusion factors:

- living in or coming from unprivileged socio-economic backgrounds
- living in rural or in urban areas
- low schooling,
- no employment or employment that provides an income less than necessary to live,

- highly traumatizing experiences such as gender violence or forms of exploitation,
- absence or weakness of balancing services for working mothers or support for emancipation,
- gender and sexual orientation-based marginalization of groups such as LGBTIQ*.
- belonging to cultures with strongly patriarchal mentality
- legal status of immigrants or refugees (concerning lack of knowledge or understanding of their rights, language barriers, traumatic experience in migration, disrespect of their basic rights and freedoms, xenophobia).
- lack or very limited access to electronic media and the internet

The interaction of these factors affects mostly:

1. Women from rural areas, that face factors of marginalization related to conservative mentality and being excluded from education, employment or health because of the remoteness of higher-level educational institutions or specialized medical services, and of very few job opportunities in their area. Additionally, rural women are more at risk of poorness (widows, divorced or unmarried; for having always worked unofficially, etc)

2. For women residing in urban areas, the risk of exclusion is different: even if urban areas offer more support to people in need and also more opportunities to access formal, non-formal and informal education, many of them have unstable and insecure jobs; often they have to choose between family or career and the absence of an extended family network deprives them of material and emotional support. Even if higher education is available in cities, many girls belonging to the poorest social classes leave their studies early to help the family income with their work. In these cases, their employment is very often in unskilled jobs, often without a regular employment contract and at risk of violence and assault in their workplaces.

3. Women from ethnic/cultural/religious minorities:

- Roma women, as all women that exist within societies with inherit patriarchal standards, have to face many of the previously described factors, especially concerning marital status. Nevertheless, their marginalisation is mostly attributed to the inability of the political powers to strongly promote acceptance of the Roma communities.
- The obstacles faced by women belonging to other religious minorities are in a way related to the gender role accepted as appropriate in their culture. In terms of natives that associate with other religions, the most notable example are Muslims of North-East Greece, who in many cases follow religious-based legislations which tend to impact the inheritance and other rights of their women. There are cases where they use more secular practices but the opposite is also true and can contribute to the marginalisation and underrepresentation of those Muslim women. In opposite, especially among Muslim girls born in Europe from a migrant family, the tendency to adhere to European lifestyles is very strong; this can generate family conflicts and can contribute to the marginalisation of those Muslim women.

4. Single parents. These women can be in a precarious position, regardless of studies and social background. Mothers, and especially single mothers, are generally not easily chosen as employees due to the increased responsibilities they have. These can also interconnect with any of the above or below categories and face many other discriminations and potential poverty.

5. Women victims of trafficking carry a lot of trauma due to their exploitation and they also face the risk of not experiencing freedom and independence for many years, even after interventions and support, so they are very likely to return to their exploitation environment. The support for such cases is effective if it is long-term, especially considering the identity protection legislation which allows providing grants to these initiatives (Italy)

6. Victims of gender-based violence, if they do not have their identities properly protected, they face the risk of re-experiencing this violence. Due to the fact that gender-based and intra-family violence often also takes the forms of psychological violence and economic violence, it is essential to promote, among the support actions, not only protection but also self-awareness, positive self-esteem and economic independence through the work for women who come out of experiences of violence.

7. Trans women. We chose this particular category for this case from the general LGBTQI+ community, since for the case of our experiences, the other categories can face discrimination but their risk of marginalisation is not that great as that of trans women. Trans women still have very low acceptance and visibility issues which greatly affects their employment in many economic fields (especially if their previous identity is known) and are also more likely to be sexually exploited and stigmatised.

8. Women that grew up orphaned or without families can face potential issues as independent individuals growing up, depending on the situations they dealt with as children and the trauma they carry. All of the above factors can also be true in this case, with the additional disadvantage of not having a guaranteed support in case they need it (eg. in southern Europe, traditionally older generations are considered to be able to help younger generations by providing accommodation for some time, or financial support if needed). This issue can also apply to any of the above or other cases and of course they can affect all genders.

Why we think it is important that there is easy access for learners to learning opportunities

WE START experience shows how much education and access to relevant information to face daily challenges bring our target group one step "closer" to social inclusion, and not only with an employability perspective but perhaps a human rights one.

This advancement towards the full inclusion and enjoyment of rights can be achieved through the following stages:

A. starting from self-knowledge to achieve self-awareness regarding interests, potential, limits

A process of evaluation or even self-evaluation of an individual's ability and knowledge requires, as a process, to satisfy the 4 basic components "Meaning - motivation- context – reflexivity

It should encourage, motivate and excite people. Be associated with a motivation that makes sense to them, such as being able to perform an action, communicate better, feel proud and autonomous - independent (eg filling out an application online). The search for meaning, however, is connected with the image of their future self, not of the distant but of the immediate future. When entering a person in a new learning situation, we should be careful not to drive her into an alienation of herself and her reality. That's why the assessment needs to be meaningful and related to their needs and expectations. And this expectation is associated with the removal of their fears, the need for independence, the ability to claim but also the effective management of difficult and more demanding conditions. To feel and be useful, and to know it.

They also have to have realistic expectations which are mainly related to the context: the situation, the factors, the starting point, the difficulties of development. The reflection should be focused on the specific conditions and evaluate the before and after on a specific context.

For all these reasons, the WE START approach is not limited to the self-assessment of knowledge and skills, but wants to have self-knowledge as a starting point, the exploration of women's strengths, often not imagined by the same woman who she wants to undertake a path of growth and awareness of her potential, on which it is possible to work with methods and tools in which the woman remains the central figure.

B. Adopt best approaches and methods for orientation and development of basic and transversal skills

In view of the variety of starting situations of women we intend to support, it is important that the methods of guidance and training are varied, flexible and easy to access for them but also for guidance and vocational training professionals:

- flipped classrooms
- learning through development
- interpersonal teaching
- providing internships
- traditional approach to skills
- working in groups
- the didactic approach focused on action
- learning based on the project

It should never be overlooked the fact that many of the women in difficulty are migrants or refugees, therefore the tools and methods should have content in different languages and/or embed Google translator in the learning platforms and in other digital tools to assist women with translation when necessary in other languages.

C. Facilitate access and use digital tools

Provision of e-content via smartphones or tablets can have a potential in increase of knowledge and skills, but most of the women use smartphones or tablets, use of computers is rather limited and mostly linked to the job. According to our survey, digital tools are not seen as an opportunity for growth but as an additional means of social confinement. Women are very active on social networks (Instagram, Facebook), although these are not channels to look at the world but rather to give/build their own image.

Smartphones or tablets are used mostly for social contact, in some cases for learning reasons, quite rarely and without continuity. PCs are still popular among teachers and students because of the bigger screens and keyboards, whereas smartphones are preferably used for learning apps.

There is a clear need to deepen and broaden the range of digital tools that women in the target group have access to. Despite years of investment in ICT infrastructure throughout the adult education sector, the use of emerging technology and social media to support day to day teaching practice remains low. (Romania).

Also, audio-visual content, treasure hunting apps, information learning applications, webinars and videos, as well as public service websites and online guides (eg for Cyprus) have proven their effectiveness. Women often have access to some exercises provided or downloaded with help of the teacher (for example learning apps) but they are rarely used outside the courses. Instead, there are few (actually no) math learning apps for AE or - if there are - they are didactically ineffective.

Why are women (proportionally) so unfamiliar with I.T.? a reason for this could be related to the general concept of abilities being traditionally associated more to men than women. During the in-depth seminar, one of the CVET Trainers in IT, said that it is very important "not to question women's abilities because of gender! If women understood that being, i.e a programmer is not more difficult than many jobs they already do, they could enjoy the benefits and financial freedom that the IT sector offers. So I would like to say to all girls and women: give yourself a chance."(Greece).

Some suggestions to the policy makers

1. Why to adopt the WE START! approach?

WE START! showed some strengths that make its replicability desirable. WE START! approach appeared effective because:

- supports self-knowledge and self-awareness
- promotes life skills as well as technical-practical or disciplinary ones
- it evolves and adapts to changes to emergencies and changes in the context
- reaches a target that is difficult to reach with the traditional offer of guidance or training services (think of the effectiveness in reaching women victims of violence and trafficking, those who reside in rural areas or in the outskirts of cities)

2. Who should do what to provide easier access to marginalized women - four levels

In several European countries adult education doesn't yet constitute a widely accepted/acknowledged field. There is a great plethora of resources and models available that rarely go into systemic use because learning and training is not funded the same way as production does. We could say that there is a need to also fund long-term training programmes instead of solely innovation.

To promote integration approaches and strategies, it will be necessary to adopt several initiatives at different level:

- A. European Level
- B. National Level
- C. Local Level
- D. Institutional Level

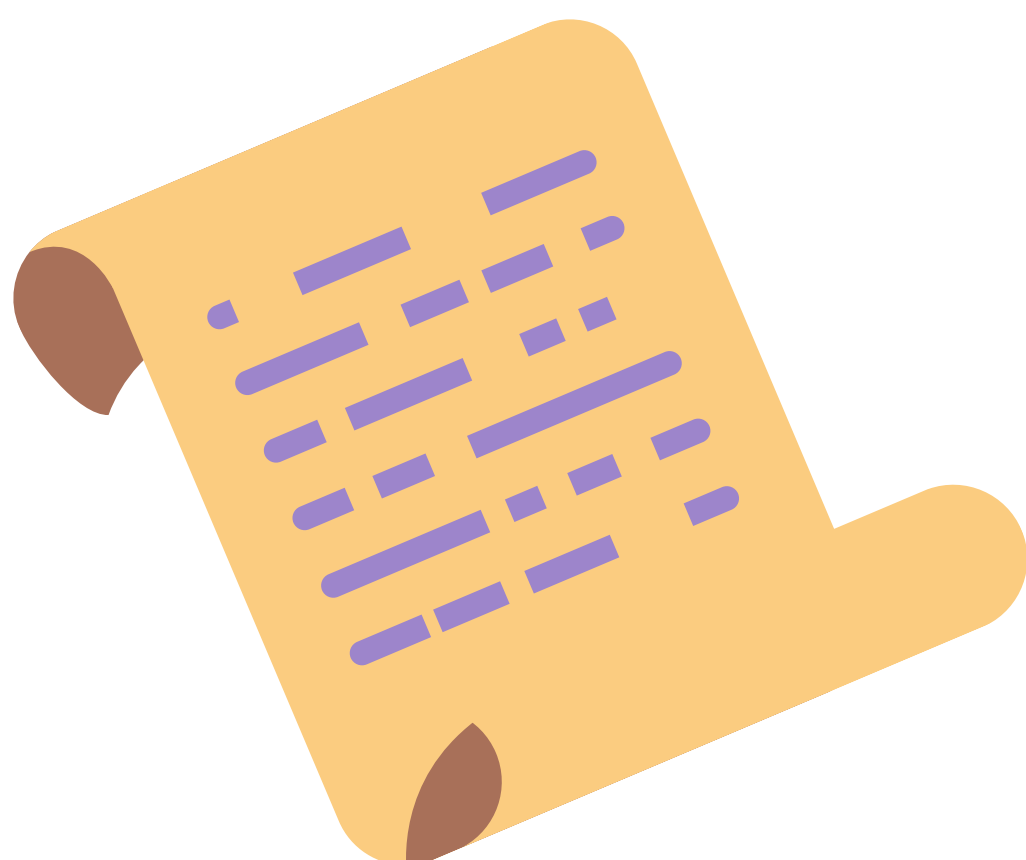
A. European Level

- Make the improvement of digital skills a priority in European Agenda for adult women learning
- Promote the innovation in adult education, from a gender perspective
- Promote an European network for exchange of methods and tools (for women's self-awareness and for acquisition of new skills)
- Analyse, evaluate, systematize and consolidate digital learning experiments launched in the pandemic emergency
- Promote a vertical multi-level integration between policies and practices carried out at European level, by local institutions and CSOs
- Develop an assessment and validation system for non-formal skills, easily applicable in digital self-assessment tools
- Define the minimum level of digital skills that trainers and empowerment operators must possess to facilitate the use digital tools for women



B. National Level

- Legislative packages that regulate the situation of women, which can be structured on several areas: normative acts that regulate equal treatment between women and men, anti-discrimination, maternity protection at work, labour legislation on health and safety, etc
- more attention to women's access difficulties to digital training and information tools (analyse and remove barriers)
- take into account the specific problems of migrant women and those living in rural areas with regard to access to training and information
- promote policies and strategies to ensure free web connection and the access to sufficient devices in the most marginal families
- increase resources aimed to the digital transition for anti-violence centers, training institutions and orientation/guidance services
- more investment in digitalization of training
- promotion of a long life learning approach in evaluation of women' skills and abilities
- more investment in long life learning and reskilling for operators and adult educators



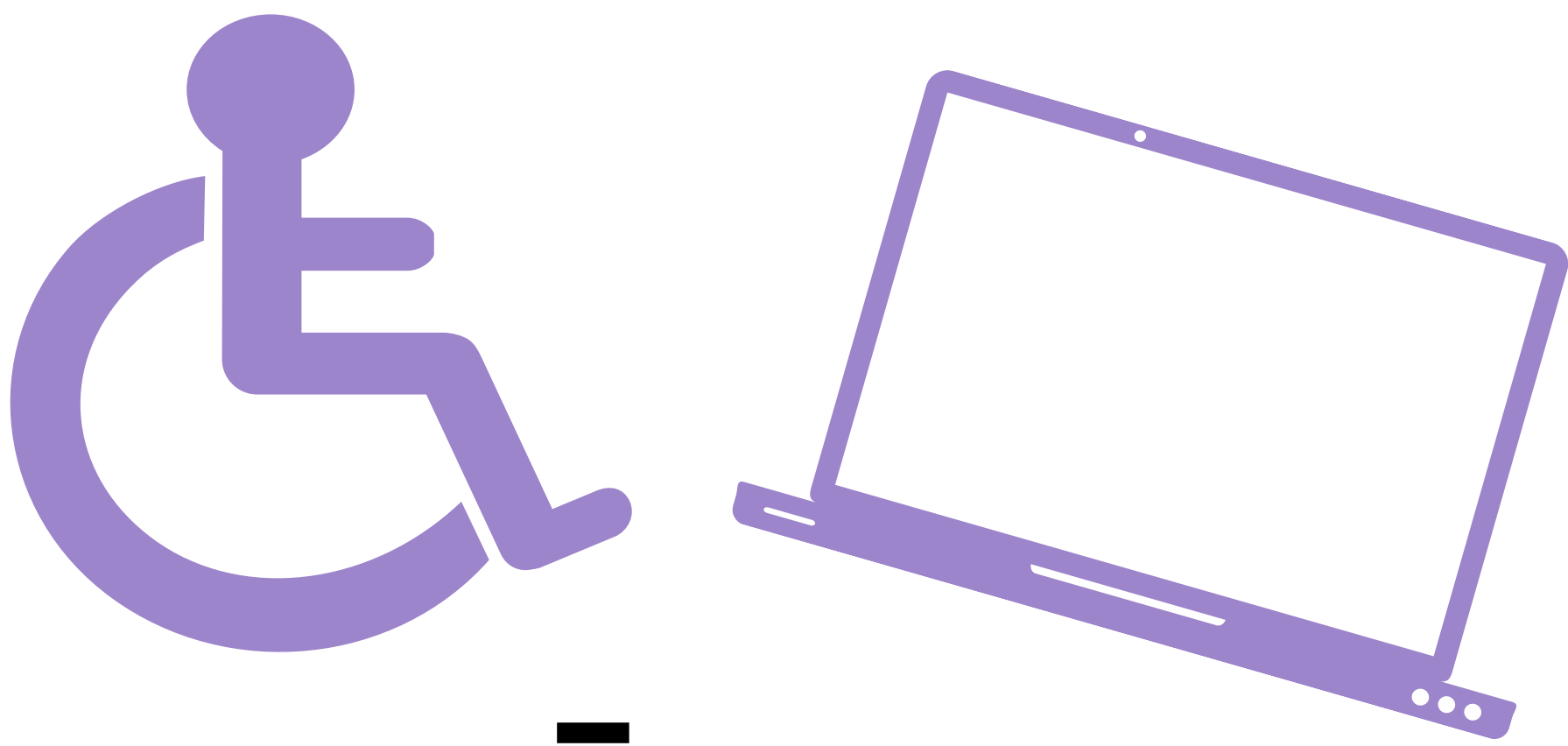
C. Local Level

- more attention to the local peculiarities of training needs and problems of women's access to ICT
- more efficient and constant presentation of these training programs in the press, social networks, etc.
- more information also available in their language for migrant/Roma women
- public and free Wi-Fi
- recovery of used devices in good condition and free distribution to more marginalised women
- free access to counselling possibilities for health information, strategies against fake news
- operators with the appropriate skills to provide counselling for ICT questions
- free spaces for learning
- wider use of self-awareness tools
- more digital tools for self-assessment of the condition of victim of violence or of labour exploitation



D. Institutional Level

- new criteria for validating skills that take into account the implicit skills acquired by women in their daily life
- more investment in digital training in childhood (primary schools) and for over 60
- more attention to the gender gap in digital abilities between men and women
- more investment specifically aimed to fill the gap in digital abilities (not only gender gap but generation gap too)



3. The lesson we have learned: some suggestion for adult women education providers

From the experience of WE START!, some key points have emerged to keep in mind in the orientation and training of women in difficulty through the use of digital tools:

- Understanding what women like (their interests and their motivations); subsequent active involvement of women in the selection of their greatest needs and how to achieve them.
- Try to keep the complexity low, so that a certain group of people can benefit from it. In other words, the platform should work as simply as WhatsApp or Facebook, because that is what most people know and can handle.
- Multilingualism is very important on all levels of the platform; there must be access to the platform in various first languages
- VET should aim to promote access to rights for migrant women and mitigate effects of previous violence
- information and training has to be concerned not only with “school knowledge” but also education about their rights, health, wellness, etc.
- Audio description for inexperienced readers should be provided
- The tool should be able to be used and understood without support; in any case, it is preferable that before using it, teachers/trainers introduce and explain it first
- Before using online training tools, there should be exercises carried out during the course before they can be practised online
- The platform should provide useful and interesting content and information
- Parallel to the platform, there should be an app developed for better access for everybody
- Access to the tool with e-mail address is a significant barrier for many but, nowadays, having an email address is an indispensable prerequisite for communicating via the web, therefore, it is positive that at least an email address is required to access the tools

- Digital skills of operators engaged in inclusion paths should not be taken for granted: they should attend continuous training to increase of their IT skills
- Adult education organisations shouldn't strictly choose academic performance but also detect those elements in people that would allow them to become lifelong learners and support education throughout life
- Learners should have easy access to spaces where to work, learn and feel included at the same time.

Different phases of WE START! are taking place during the health emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic. The experiences of teachers and counsellors gathered in this period have highlighted some aspects of digital learning that we believe is important to also mention here.

To limit the spread of the pandemic, there has been made a wide use of distance learning and digital communication. The increase in the use of technological means, has helped people become familiar with them and feel more comfortable using technology for their communication and learning needs. Previously, adult education and vocational training were intended only as tools for a person's employment, while now some people see them as great opportunities to learn and familiarize themselves with IT tools, to be used as "windows to the world" and as a means of knowledge and learning available in any place and at any time.

Unfortunately, these new opportunities cannot be easily enjoyed by all women: in many cases, the number of devices available in each family is less than the number of members and the device is used only by the husband or child (usually male). The distance learning in emergency situations has also shown the difficulty of many women (especially migrants following second language courses) in the use of learning platforms.

A further problem encountered concerned spaces for learning: in many cases women who want to improve their skills do not have a place to study (large families, small houses, permanent high noise levels). We believe it is important to take all these issues into consideration, proposing answers, solutions and facilities that are also valid in the pandemic as well as in the future post-pandemic phase.

4. Concluding remarks

The experience of the partners and the knowledge of the context, in which they operate, allow us to affirm the importance of putting at the center of the political debate and training practices, the removal of obstacles that prevent equal opportunities for access to training for women.

The public health emergency, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has amplified and made more visible the gender disparity, to the detriment of women, in many fields, first and foremost the possibility of accessing or continuing their personal growth through digital tools. It has become evident, that for many women, IT skills are limited to the use of social media and not to "traditional" electronic communication such as emails or learning platforms, bandwidth is not sufficient, people cannot get more access to the internet as they cannot buy additional data volume.

Training aimed at female empowerment cannot be limited to providing knowledge and skills but must promote their rights in a global way: interventions to promote rights are indispensable to fill existing deficits to the detriment of women, made more evident and deeper from the socio-health situation that the world is currently facing. Similarly, to promote increased levels of female active participation to the labour market, tools and strategies must also move on multiple fields, from improving self-knowledge and awareness of the resources possessed and interests, to access to all useful information for personal and professional growth.



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