



Coop4Equality

STUDY REPORT

How Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystems Incorporate a Gender Lens: Insights and recommendations from six European countries

SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship has been under scrutiny for several years now. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, there is less of a gender gap in social entrepreneurship : *"of the world's social entrepreneurs, an estimated 55% are male and 45% are female - a gender gap that is less pronounced than in commercial entrepreneurship"*.

Nevertheless, many reports have highlighted the need for a better integration of women and gender minorities in the social economy, especially as social entrepreneurs.

In fact, the sector of social entrepreneurship is - as the sector of traditional entrepreneurship - deeply marked by gender disparities preventing women from accessing the right support, establishing long-term solutions and taking advantage of this ecosystem as men entrepreneurs do.

In this context, the Coop4Equality project (Cooperation for a Gender-Equal Social Economy) aims to enable gender-lens to be taken more fully into account in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem by building strategies and methodologies that foster an inclusive and collaborative ecosystem for its stakeholders (investors, mentors, incubators, support organizations, etc.).

KEY DEFINITIONS

Entrepreneurship: Pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled.

Pr. Howard Stevenson, Harvard Business School

Social entrepreneurship : Addressing social problems through innovative practices, distinguishing it from other forms of entrepreneurship by its explicit mission of creating social value rather than generating profit alone.

PETRELLA, Francesca et al., Journal of Journal of Innovation Economics & Management

Gender-lens: Approach used to analyze how policies, decisions, or initiatives affect different genders. It helps reveal inequalities and ensures that gender differences are considered to promote fairness and equality.

Shiva Sharma, MPP, Staff Writer, Brief Policy Perspectives

Coordinated by Empow'Her and implemented by partners from six different countries (France, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Portugal, and Romania), this initial study intends to collect data about gender mainstreaming in the European social entrepreneurship ecosystem to better understand stakeholders' practices and customs regarding gender equality and inclusivity, and allow further collaborations with the creation of handbooks and training materials.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- How do the social entrepreneurship ecosystems mainstream gender-lens?
- Is the social entrepreneurship ecosystem adapted to women entrepreneurs?
- Does it take their needs into account?
- Is there a good understanding of gender equality within this ecosystem?

Based on 92 responses from the social entrepreneurship sector in 6 European countries and 17 interviews with key informants, this report provides an overview of the current practices, needs and challenges identified by the ecosystem's stakeholders.



**6
COUNTRIES**

**92
ANSWERS**

**17
INTERVIEWS**

METHODOLOGY

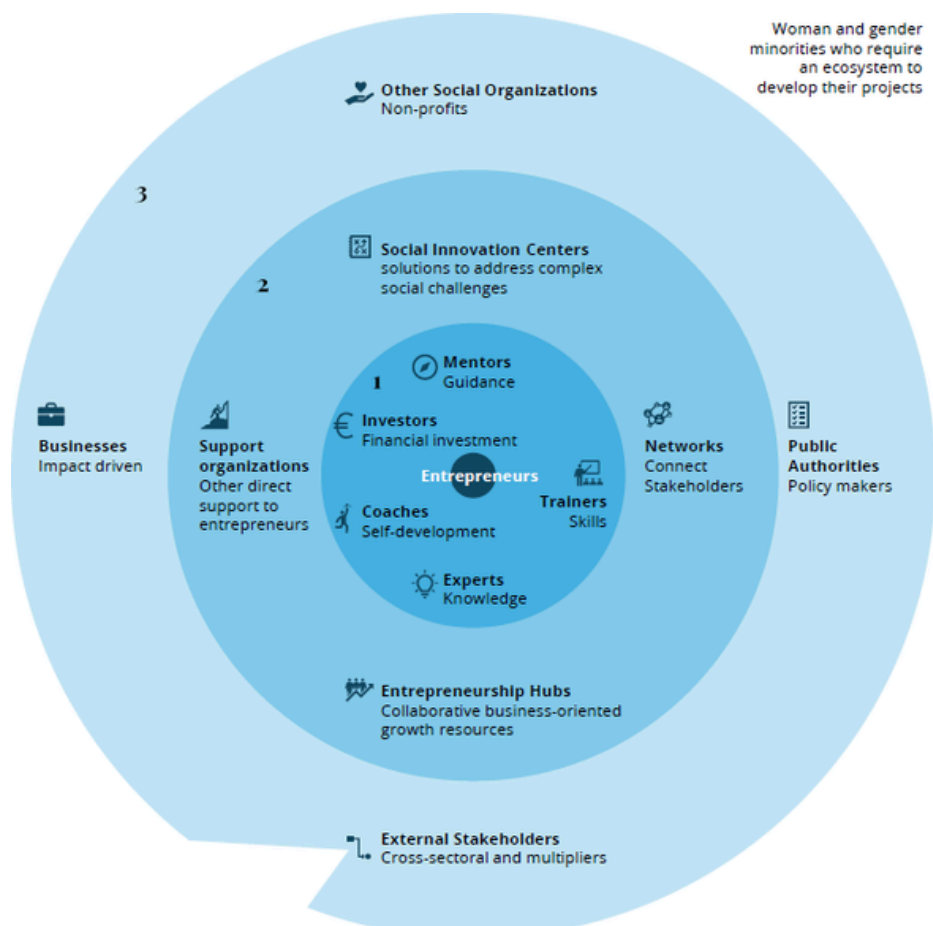
Ecosystem mapping

Prior to the data collection, a mapping of the European social entrepreneurship ecosystem was conducted in order to create a database gathering individuals and organizations ready to commit or already committed to fostering a gender-equal culture in the social entrepreneurship sector.

According to Van de Ven (2019), the entrepreneurial ecosystem consists of all the elements that are required to sustain entrepreneurship in a particular territory, specifically four elements:

- Institutional arrangements that legitimate, regulate and incentivize entrepreneurship;
- Public resource endowments of basic scientific knowledge, financing mechanisms and pools of competent labor;
- Market demand of informed consumers for the products and services offered by entrepreneurs;
- Proprietary business activities that private entrepreneurs provide through R&D.

Based on these elements, three layers of stakeholders were identified for this study. To this day, the database includes 300 entries (approx. 50/country)



Questionnaire

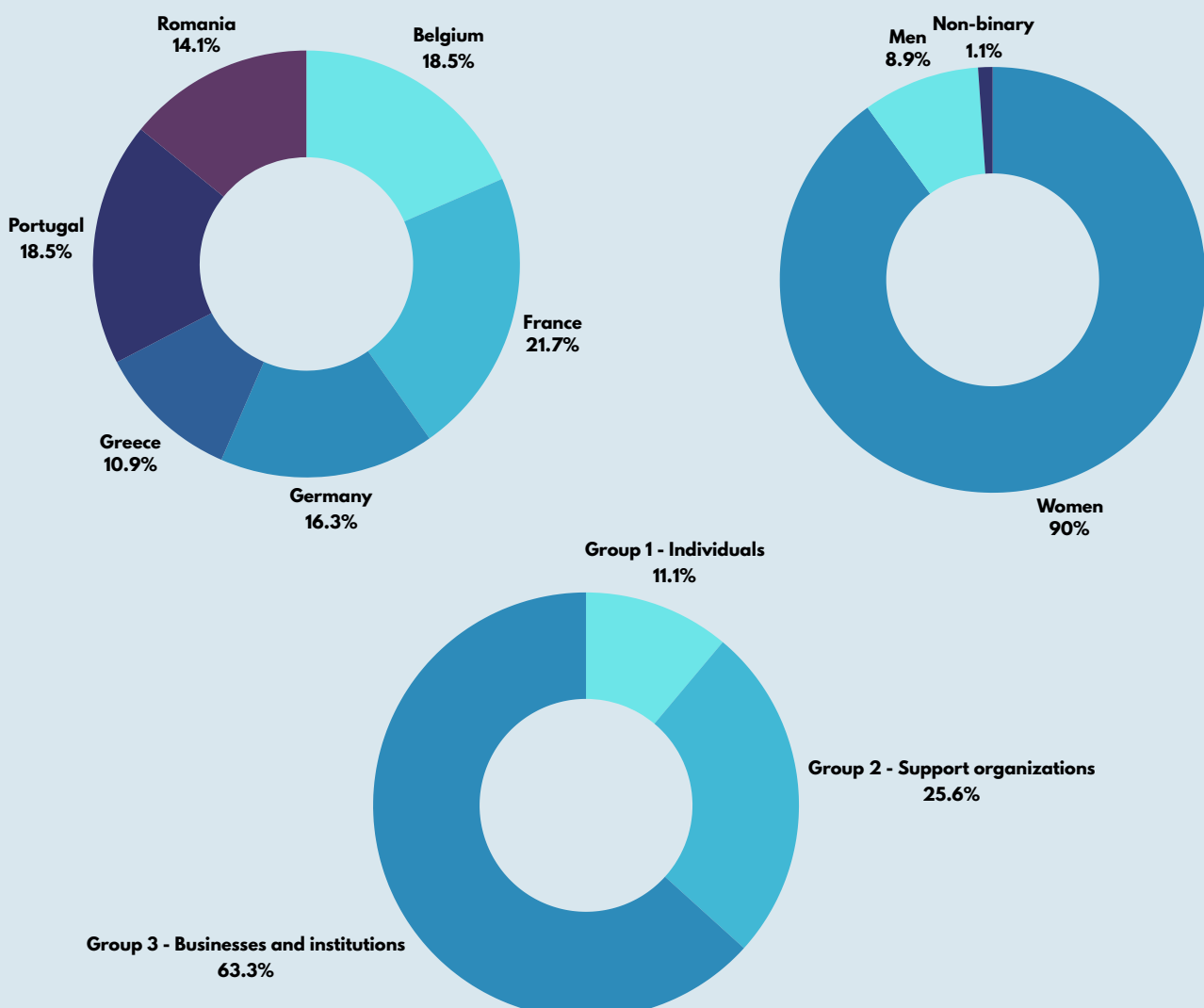
In order to get quantitative data on gender mainstreaming in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem, a survey was conducted, aiming to gather 100 answers of individuals and organizations in the targeted countries.

The survey was designed around four research themes, with different sub research questions for each target group mentioned above.

- Social entrepreneurship stakeholders' understanding and ambition on gender issues and gender equality;
- The integration of gender-lens in the social entrepreneurship stakeholders' internal practices;
- Gender mainstreaming in support programs to women entrepreneurs ;
- The specific needs of the ecosystem.

The survey was sent to individuals and organizations previously identified in the ecosystem mapping, from mid-May to the end of June 2024. In total, 92 answers to the survey were received and analyzed.

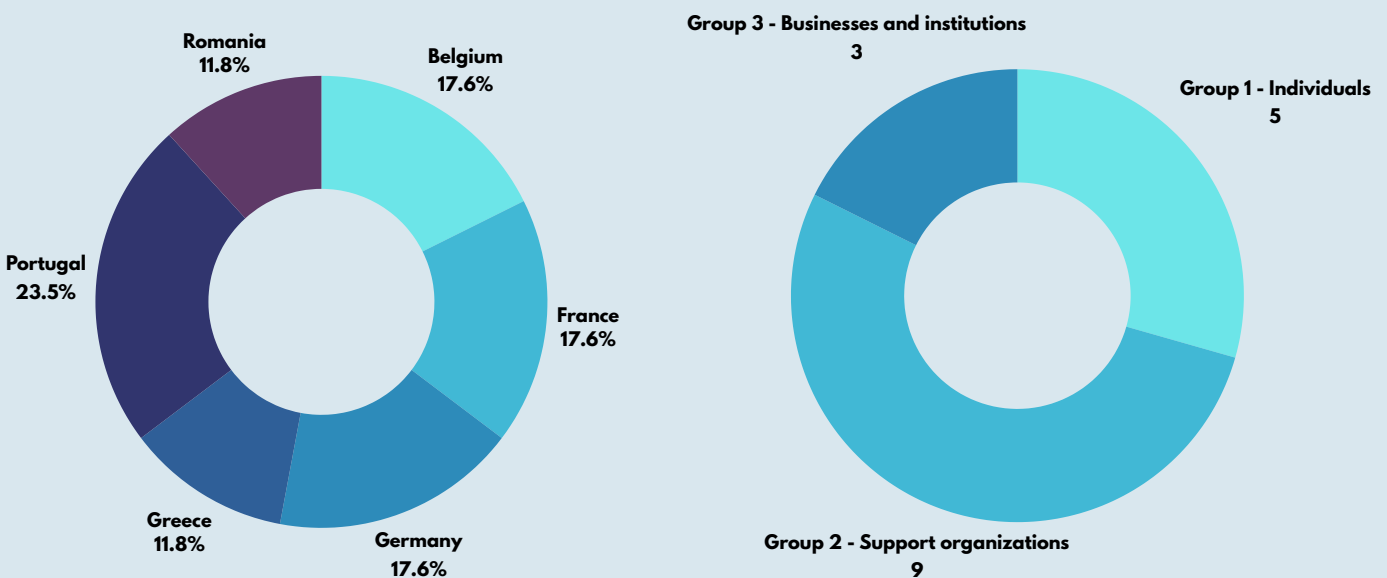
Main characteristics of the respondents



Interviews

To complement the survey, interview scripts for each target group have been developed, with the objective of interviewing one representative of each group per country to get qualitative data.

In total, 17 interviews were conducted with a fair representation of each country and type of stakeholders.



Limitations of the study

- **Representativity** : due to the number of respondents (92) and the choice to focus on 6 countries, this study aims at better understanding an ecosystem rather than embodying a global European reality on social entrepreneurship. For the same reason, the choice was made not to conduct a country-specific analysis. Moreover, the respondents were part of the initial mapping based on partners' networks which can lead to a representativity bias.
- **Inclusion and diversity** : respondents were mainly women with no sufficient data to analyze the specific experiences of gender minorities in the social entrepreneurship sector.
- **Self-assessment** : the questionnaire had several multi-choice answers and it was for every respondent to self-assess its reference group (individuals ; entrepreneurial actors ; institutions and businesses) which might have blurred the limits between the three groups. Choice was made to analyze by group and share, when relevant, the differences or similarities in the answers provided.

KEY FINDINGS

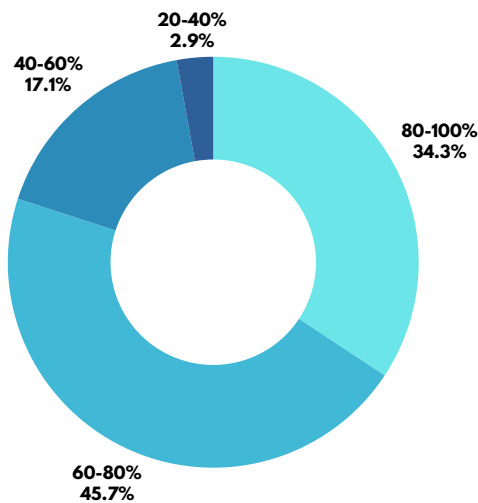
- FINDING #1** A high representation of women in social entrepreneurship does not prevent from gender bias within the ecosystem
- FINDING #2** The patriarchal system and its social norms prevent the social entrepreneurship ecosystem from fully addressing the root causes of gender inequalities
- FINDING #3** Organizations demonstrate gender sensitivity in their discourse and operations but rarely formalize it through internal gender policies and processes
- FINDING #4** Management positions are accessible to women, but leadership roles remain predominantly male
- FINDING #5** Women entrepreneurs are facing persistent funding difficulties, especially when they move beyond funds dedicated to social entrepreneurship
- FINDING #6** Specific programs for women entrepreneurs are impactful, but acting as a 'band-aid' to a still unequal ecosystem



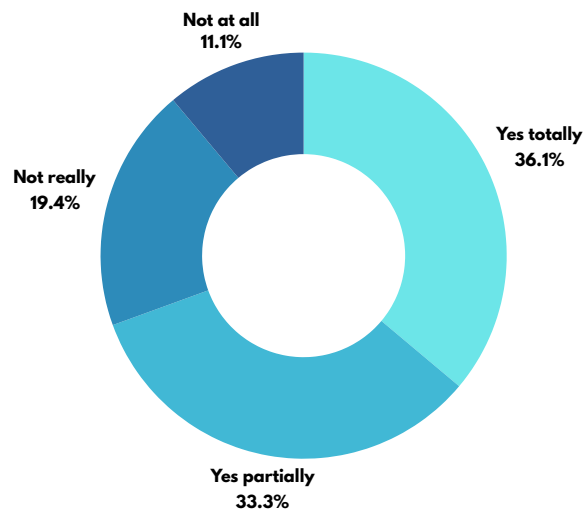
Finding #1 : A high representation of women in social entrepreneurship does not prevent from gender bias within the ecosystem

From the 35 respondents to the survey (*group 2*), a third of them has 80% or more of women in their staff, with a large majority having more than 60% of women in their organization. The respondents underlined as well the high representation of women in leadership positions.

What is the proportion of women working in your organization?

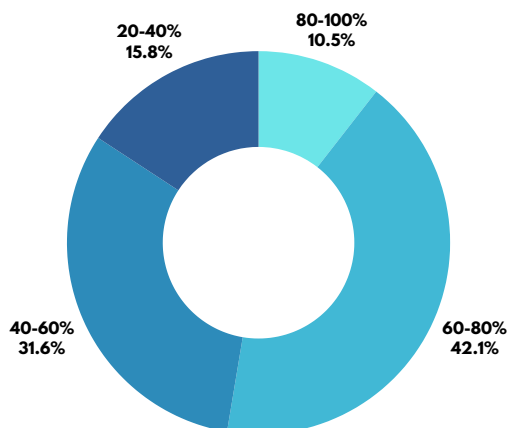


Is the representation of women and men in leadership positions evenly distributed in your organization?



Finally, women are also well represented as beneficiaries of the actions implemented by these organizations. According to the same respondents, over 50% of women are benefiting from their services.

What proportion of women benefit from your services?



These findings relate to the two key concepts that emerged from the respondents when sharing their understanding of gender mainstreaming in the social entrepreneurship sector. First, that men and women should have the same access to entrepreneurship. Second, that there should be an equal representation of men and women in the ecosystem, whether it is as entrepreneur, leader or employees.

Looking at the data, women seem to be overrepresented both within the structures working in social entrepreneurship, and as beneficiaries of the services provided by these organizations.

This observation must be balanced with the testimonies of the organizations interviewed, which question the strong representation of women in the social impact entrepreneurial ecosystem as a result of gender norms.

“I think that women are represented better in the sphere of social entrepreneurship than entrepreneurship in general (not sufficiently of course in all levels), because they are more oriented towards the social impact or when their business has a social character. Sometimes they find the social entrepreneurial ecosystem less competitive and more collective for their actions.”

An NGO from Greece (Group 3)

Although women are highly represented in the social entrepreneurship sector, this does not mean that the structural causes of gender inequalities (*see finding #2*) are properly understood nor addressed by organizations working in that field. Through this survey, we will see that working with women for women is not enough to have and foster a gender-lens approach.



Finding #2 : The patriarchal system and its social norms prevent social entrepreneurship from fully addressing the root causes of gender inequalities

The survey and interviews underline several aspects of social norms and gender inequalities that can impact the implication of women in social entrepreneurship.

Women often internalize stereotypes as well, making it more difficult for them to believe in themselves and to initiate an entrepreneurial endeavor.

This feeling is reinforced by the fact that there are very few successful women entrepreneurs that are quoted as role models. Programs and storytelling usually rely on men's success stories and the overall economic sphere is mostly run by men.

“Increasing the visibility of female role models is necessary to inspire and support women entrepreneurs.”

An entrepreneur from Germany (Group 1)

This is particularly important with regards to funding, as these stereotypes hinder women from accessing the same opportunities as men. For instance, one interviewer underlined a belief in women's reduced availability due to their family responsibilities, and another pointed out the risk of increasing this trend if no specific policies are applied.

Gender norms in social entrepreneurship are also visible in the areas chosen both by men and women, underlining the continuation of a gendered division of labor. For instance, care work mainly relates to women, even in the entrepreneurial field. As for the salaries, interviews highlight that lower salaries in that sector might have led to a higher representation of women.

“More women in social entrepreneurship tackle problems like fashion where male entrepreneurs focus more on buildings and constructions.”

An NGO/accelerator from Belgium (Group 3)

“There is always a form of internalization around the idea of not being able to succeed.”

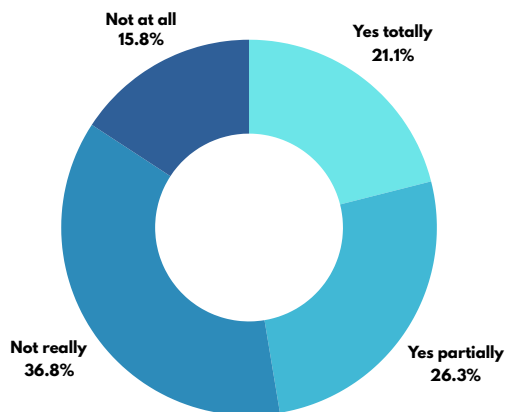
A support organization from France (Group 2)



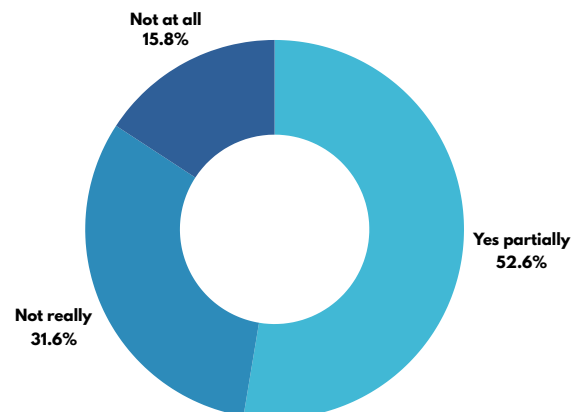
Finally, the gender bias also lies in the social roles affected to women. Interviews conducted with key stakeholders of the social entrepreneurship ecosystem show that women face higher difficulties to balance their work and personal lives, especially when they are mothers. Some states that extra time is hard to find therefore reducing their ability to network or focus on their business. Others underline the lack of support from their surrounding environment including the persistence of gender stereotypes.

These different aspects of gender inequalities underline the importance of addressing the root causes of social norms to better tackle the gender gap. The survey shows that the needs of women are not systematically assessed (47% stating they analyze them) and that the support provided is partially adapted to women's needs for 52% of the respondents.

Do you specifically analyze the expectations and needs of women benefiting from your services ?



Would you say that the entrepreneurship support is adapted to the women specific needs ?



Organizations and individuals agree that gender-related challenges need to be specifically tackled so that women can not only access tailored programs and be better represented, but can also develop their business in an enabling environment.



“Equality depends on how far men and women go. It is usually men or women who aren't mothers who reach further.”

A support organization from Portugal (Group 2)

Finding #3 : Organizations demonstrate gender sensitivity in their discourse and operations but rarely formalize it through internal gender policies and processes

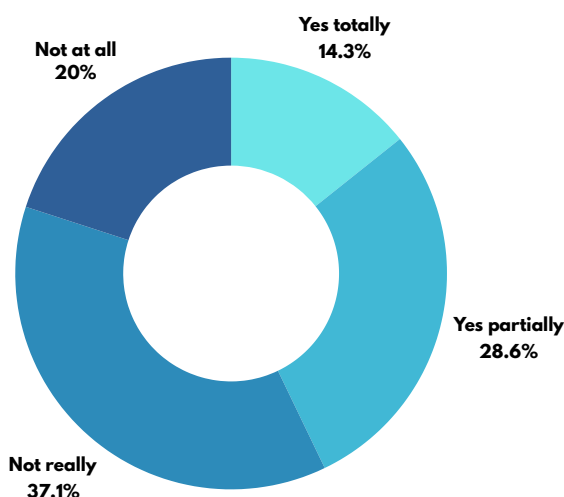
This study has shown that the social entrepreneurship ecosystem perceives itself as gender-sensitive and predominantly feminine, which is reflected in the composition of the organizations interviewed (*see finding #1*).

However, interviews that were conducted reveal that these organizations, because they perceive themselves as already gender-sensitive in their practices, do not consider the formalization of internal gender policies and processes as essential or a priority for achieving an inclusive organization.

This is well reflected in the survey answers presented below, which show that less than 45% of the respondents consider to have clear commitments and policies on gender equality, diversity and inclusion.

**Does your organization have clear engagements and policy on gender equality, diversity and inclusion ?
(Exemple : gender policy, charters of values on inclusion)**

35 respondents - Group 2 : Support Organizations



"Our structures are already more aware to issues of gender equality, individual freedoms, and cultural rights, whatever they may be. Therefore, we haven't necessarily highlighted specific policies for gender or inclusion. However, this doesn't prevent our governing bodies from reflecting on possible developments."

A support organization from France (Group 2)

“While they work a lot on the gender perspective and collaborate with other organizations for this topic, they are active in multiple actions and sometimes this does not give them the opportunity to ‘build’ in detail the policy and the processes that are initially expected to be applied in order to effectively integrate the gender dimension.”

An NGO from Greece (Group 3)



Nuance should be added to this observation, based on the various answers from the interviews :

- Firstly, there is still a significant number of actors who are formalising or attempting to formalise these policies (around 40% according to our quantitative survey). This remains a significant percentage compared to more traditional sectors.
- In our interviews, organizations often mention that they are actively reflecting on gender equality issues in the workplace. They recognize areas for improvement and are engaging in meaningful discussions about topics such as menstrual leave, work-life balance, maternity management, and more.

This creates a fertile ground for supporting social entrepreneurship organizations in developing robust inclusion and equality policies. By helping organizations formalize genuine gender equality policies and programs, this awareness of these issues can translate into a greater impact for women in the social and solidarity entrepreneurship sector.

Finding #4 : Management positions are accessible to women, but leadership roles remain predominantly male

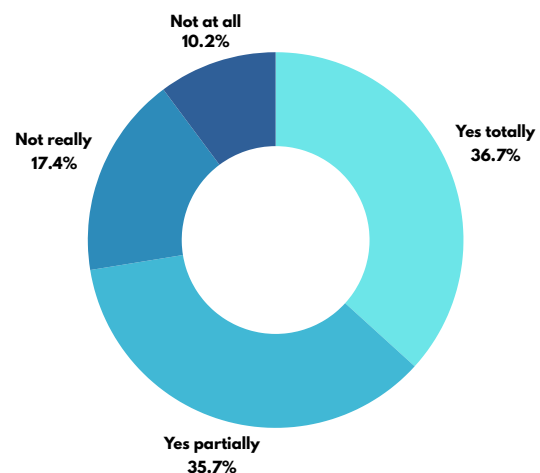
Qualitative parity goes beyond quantitative (numerical) parity to explain the level of equality in decision-making mechanisms and power structures. In an inclusive ecosystem, the strong representation of women should translate into a strong representation within decision-making processes and leadership positions.

The study attempts to understand the dynamics of leadership within the social entrepreneurial ecosystem, specifically whether women have access to director positions, and how leadership roles are distributed within this sector.

At first glance, the quantitative data shows a sector where leadership positions are partially shared between men and women (see chart), although only 36.7% of the organizations surveyed report a 'totally' equal distribution.

However, several testimonies (in the majority of the countries surveyed) go beyond these figures and mention a sector "very privileged", still dominated by patriarchal structures and organizations, where women remain constrained by a glass ceiling effect.

Is the representation of women and men in leadership positions evenly distributed in your organization?



"This sector remains marked by patriarchy, which has occupied leadership positions in political, technical, or associative organizations for many years."

An NGO from France (Group 2)

“The numbers of men in leadership roles is much higher.”

An NGO from Portugal (Group 3)

“I perceive the SE sector in Germany as very white and privileged. Here, too, it is primarily white (cis) men who hold the top positions and primarily fulfill stereotypically "male" roles.”

An NGO from Germany (Group 3)

The various interviews conducted with organizations in the ecosystem highlight these contradictions. From over ten interviews of support organizations, a 50/50 repartition was observed between men and women leading the structure. However, four of these organizations interviewed were feminist organizations primarily dedicated to promoting feminist entrepreneurship and gender equality (all led by women). Of the six more general structures, five were led by male CEOs / General Directors.

Two observations can be made :

- A bias must be considered in our questionnaire due to the networks we have mobilized for this study, which are likely more aware of gender issues than the average actors in the ecosystem.
- A strong representation of men in leadership positions within organizations that have many female managers.

“We have an internal policy, and our team is predominantly female. We have 65% women in the organization, and in the management team of 7 people, 5 are women.”

A support organization from Romania (Group 2)

This testimony is referring to a team in Romania, working in an organization where the CEO is a man. This situation was observed a lot in each country of the study : organizations with many female managers, but with a male CEO. This is a perfect illustration of the glass ceiling that women in the sector still face.



Finding #5 : Women entrepreneurs are facing persistant funding difficulties, especially when they move beyond funds dedicated to social entrepreneurship

Interviews reveal strong difficulties in accessing funding for women entrepreneurs operating in the social economy sector. Indeed, various studies have shown that structures and funds specifically dedicated to social entrepreneurship projects seem to be more aware and inclusive compared to traditional funding structures. However, the strong presence of men within funding committees remains a major factor contributing to gender bias in credit allocation decisions.

These biases and challenges become even more pronounced when women seek larger amounts of funding to expand their businesses. Due to the constraints of social economy funding, women have to turn to traditional financing structures to develop their project, which are generally less aware of the gender biases and stereotypes that women encounter during their funding journey. This issue has negative impacts the ability of women-led projects to scale.

Access to networks also affects women's ability to find funding opportunities. Similar to traditional entrepreneurial sectors, women face challenges in developing their networks due to personal and family constraints (*see finding #1*). The development of women's communities could facilitate the flow of information and the sharing of opportunities, thereby enhancing funding possibilities for women entrepreneurs.

“In many entrepreneurship support bodies and especially funding entities there are still prejudices and stereotypes about the ability and commitment of women, especially when they have family.”

An NGO from Greece (Group 3)



“From a research study we have conducted in 2020, we observed that the stakeholders with a social orientation have a better gender ratio in their beneficiaries compared to traditional banks or funds.”

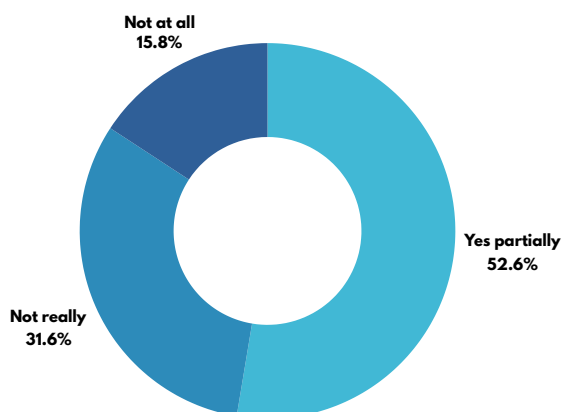
A support organization from Portugal (Group2)

Finding #6 : Specific programs for women entrepreneurs are impactful, but acting as a 'band-aid' to a still unequal ecosystem

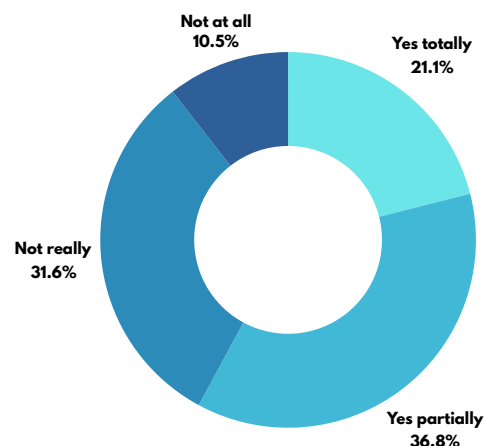
There is a noticeable effort to promote gender equality in the European social entrepreneurship ecosystem. Various programs and networks are specifically tailored for women, offering numerous opportunities for female leaders to present their ideas and be inspired by others. These programs are often implemented to address the concrete disadvantages faced by women in entrepreneurship: lack of funding, limited access to networks, underrepresentation in certain sectors, etc. They provide crucial support, such as mentorship, training, dedicated funding, or networking opportunities, which help women overcome some of the immediate barriers.

However, outside of these women-focused programs, there is a limited systemic reflection in other activities of the ecosystem. The graphs below show that in non-targeted programs, the specific needs of women are not enough considered. Moreover, targeting women seems not enough anymore to include all women in their diversity, adopting an intersectional approach.

Would you say that the entrepreneurship support offer is adapted to the women specific's needs ?



Have you already analyzed and adapted your activities to accommodate any specific constraints that entrepreneurs may have?



The presence of women-focused programs has a significant impact on the number of women entering entrepreneurship. However, the lack of systemic solutions hinders them when they try to move beyond the early stage or pre-seed phase.

This observation was nicely summarized when a respondent referred to the concept of continuity.

“We've also noticed that many women tend to become solopreneurs.”

A support organization from Romania (Group 2)

“Most social projects are conceived and initiated by women entrepreneurs. Yet reference projects are led by men. This suggests (without research support) that there is a greater burden on women. Continuity is challenging for women due to balancing professional life with personal/ family.”

A support organization from Portugal (group 2)

The challenge of continuity for women entrepreneurs is a direct effect of the current support policies implemented by the ecosystem. Specific programs are extremely useful in helping women feel legitimate and supported in launching their entrepreneurial ventures. However, to develop successful and high-growth businesses, they must be integrated into the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem and move beyond these programs specifically dedicated to them.

These initiatives specifically aimed at women entrepreneurs often act as a 'band-aid' because they do not address the underlying causes of inequalities within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Gender biases, limited access to venture capital, and stereotypes that confine women to certain sectors persist. Women continue to be underrepresented in high-growth and successful social companies and have less access to key resources.

While these programs are important, they are not enough to transform a still unequal entrepreneurial ecosystem. Structural reforms are needed to address the root causes of inequalities. This includes implementing large-scale inclusion policies, raising awareness of gender biases in decision-making and funding processes, and providing increased support to women entrepreneurs across all sectors.

To make these initiatives more than just simple temporary corrections, they need to be part of a broader effort to create a fairer and more inclusive entrepreneurial environment.



RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION #1

Creating gender-transformative trainings and methodologies

RECOMMENDATION #2

Enabling the development of peer-to-peer exchanges and community-based spaces

RECOMMENDATION #3

Enhancing the collaboration between organizations through innovative initiatives

RECOMMENDATION #4

Ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged in an impact-oriented approach

RECOMMENDATION #5

Developing advocacy material for action



Creating gender-transformative trainings

A gender-sensitive approach focuses on acknowledging and accommodating gender differences without challenging the underlying causes of inequality, whereas gender-transformative methods aim to tackle the root causes of systemic biases.

Gender-transformative trainings are essential in fostering real, sustainable change in gender dynamics, especially in sectors like social entrepreneurship where equity is vital for innovation and social impact.

By addressing issues such as unconscious bias, power relations, and access to resources, these methodologies can represent a tremendous asset for social entrepreneurship stakeholders to get a deeper understanding of how gender shapes economic and social outcomes.

The output of such methodologies and training material is therefore not to reduce the biases, but to contribute to dismantle it.

Enabling the development of peer-to-peer exchanges and community-based spaces

The lack of integration of women into entrepreneurial networks has real impacts on their ability to navigate this ecosystem and access development opportunities. This can partly be addressed by the creation of women entrepreneurs communities :

- To tackle topics that women identify themselves as challenges and that sometimes would be otherwise invisibilised in the current system ;
- To dedicate time to specific subjects such as work-life balance, self-confidence, time management, menstrual cycle to be included in specific programs ;
- To share information and economic opportunities ;
- To improve collaboration between businesses and help creating business networks and dialogue spaces for women who are often isolated.

Different formats such as co-development could promote the growth of these communities.

While the creation of women-led communities provides valuable spaces for empowerment and connection, it is crucial to recognize that they alone do not resolve the systemic exclusion of women from broader business networks. To drive real change, conversations must also involve men to address the root causes of inequality.

Enhancing the collaboration between organizations through innovative initiatives

Gender inequalities being entrenched at different levels of the ecosystem and more broadly within society, their dismantlement necessarily requires the commitment of all stakeholders. These alliances would enable the development of innovative solutions in a systemic and more collaborative way.

It can include the following initiatives :

- To unite non-financial and financial actors to partner on long-term solutions across the entire entrepreneurial journey ;
- To connect the entrepreneurial ecosystem with feminist organizations to build transformative approaches and change mindsets and behaviors ;
- To bridge the entrepreneurial ecosystem with social services to develop solutions for all women ;
- To link the private sector with public authorities to influence legislation and work on sustainable public policies.

All stakeholders must join forces to fight against gender inequalities in entrepreneurship using an intersectional approach to create a sustainable and inclusive change.

Ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged in an impact-oriented approach

This study highlights the critical role played by impact measurement and a continuous evaluation of the programs and policies designed to support positive social change.

Accountability plays a critical role in this process. First, organizations and their employees benefit from this evaluation as it helps create a purpose and common vision, ensuring that gender-sensitive actions are meaningful.

Second, it is essential for the social entrepreneurship sector to demonstrate tangible results and secure fundings and also act as role models towards their funders.

Last, and most importantly, the individuals and organizations that are being supported by the social entrepreneurship sector must be included in the design and evaluation process to ensure that the support provided is both relevant and effective.

Embedding evaluation and impact measurement into a continuous learning approach allows for a greater adaptability to respond to gender dynamics and challenges.

Developing advocacy material for action

Advocacy efforts at the European level are crucial to better document and address the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. While gender equality is widely recognized as a priority, persistent barriers remain, particularly around motherhood and access to financing as underlined by this study.

Developing targeted advocacy actions can not only highlight these difficulties but also push for meaningful policy changes that would benefit women entrepreneurs and the whole social entrepreneurship ecosystem across Europe.

For instance, the current initiative called the "Clause of the Most Favored European Woman" aims to ensure that women across the European Union benefit from the best gender equality practices available in any member state. This principle aims to harmonize rights and protections by applying the highest standards.

Another interesting initiative could be the implementation of an Europe-wide barometer on female entrepreneurship, based on the Veuve Clicquot Barometer, an annual study that tracks the challenges, achievements, and perceptions of female entrepreneurs globally.

What else did we learn?

This study on gender mainstreaming in the social entrepreneurship sector in Europe has allowed us to identify some initial trends, and share a few recommendations that we are eager to develop internally and with our network, but it is only a first step.

There are several key aspects that need to be addressed moving forward.

- To embrace the full diversity of European women entrepreneurs, going beyond a monolithic view of "women". Women's experiences are diverse, shaped by factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status and age, and that should be reflected in future researches.
- To adopt an intersectional approach to examine different social categories - such as race, gender, and class - that interact with each other and shape gender dynamics in the social entrepreneurship field.
- To collect and analyse future data not only considering women but also gender minorities to better understand their specific needs and representation within this sector.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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- Roxana Lupu, Ashoka Romania, Romania
- Christina Galani, Stimmuli, Greece

Our respective networks contributed either by answering the questionnaire, accepting to be interviewed or by forwarding the information and sharing the survey to their own networks : thank you !

This study will allow us to implement new training material and dissemination actions throughout the project. As mentioned earlier, this is only a first step.

If you want to follow our work on this specific project, we invite you to join our [LinkedIn group](#) and become part of the Coop4Equality community, which gathers social economy stakeholders committed to gender equality.



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