



2021-1-FR01-KA220-VET-000032978

# *Map Export Dynamics, Challenges & Opportunities for female-run businesses.*

## *A transnational needs assessment*

### **EU level Snapshot**

**Prepared by IHF asbl**

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.  
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## Introduction

In Europe, SMEs represent 99% of businesses. According to the European Commission, they employ around 100 million people<sup>1</sup>. On the other side, all SMEs in Europe struggle to expand their businesses beyond EU borders. Female SMEs in Europe are the ones facing most relevant difficulties in exporting their SMEs abroad. These are the reasons driving this EU level report. It will investigate opportunities and challenges faced by women-led businesses in internationalising their SMEs especially in three sectors: Food, Fashion, Handicraft.

In the case of women-led businesses, major difficulties in internationalisation are due to the lack of cultural understanding of the destination markets and global commerce, difficulties in networking and identification of reliable international partners, limited internal capacity to define internationalisation strategies. This report will contribute to E4F purpose, which means spreading the following points to female SMEs in Europe:

- 1) *Mindset & Ambition*: developing a “thinking-out-of-the-box” attitude to spread the idea of international expansion within the company.
- 2) *Skills and competence of staff*: for example, using the OER Platform to improve digital skills.
- 3) *Understanding potential markets*, customer needs, culture, politics, dynamics and “how to do business”.
- 4) *Networking*: identification of new partners or networks abroad.
- 5) *Staff bandwidth and skills*: making female EU SMEs adaptable to necessities in global markets.

This report will also analyse the situation regarding the existing training curricula for Extra-EU business in Europe. These ones might serve to women entrepreneurs to expand their businesses and approach global markets reaching new clients. In this sense, E4F project will help women entrepreneurs and start-uppers to set up the goals to internationalise their businesses in Extra-EU countries. Here, it will also be analysed the negative impacts of Covid-19 in restrictions imposed to global trade and how it affected enterprises led by women entrepreneurs. Fortunately, Member States in Europe will have the chance to receive financial support from the European Commission to restore their economies and empower their SMEs (*Resilience and Recovery Plan, 2020*).

In this sense, women entrepreneurs and start-upper will also have the chance to understand their abilities in the use of digital tools. This is because E4F trainings are planned to be delivered into different format, mainly remotely, physically or hybrid. In this overview, it will be highlighted the importance of implementing E4F project across Europe for several purposes. E4F will serve not only to spread innovative training curricula, also to boost the potential of female SMEs that will learn how to internationalise their businesses and export to Extra-EU areas. Most important, E4F will serve to reduce the gender gap with male entrepreneurs across Europe, creating a new balance and boosting female SMEs potential.

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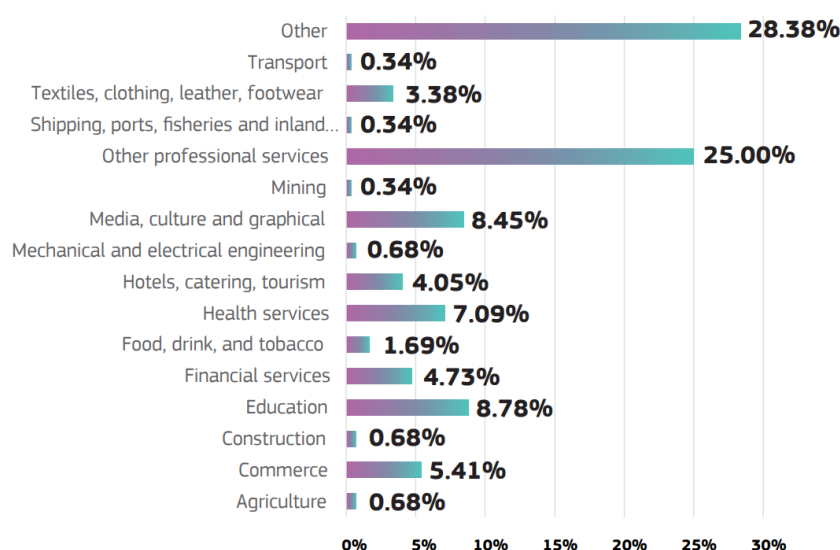
<sup>1</sup>European Commission website, *Entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)*, [SMEs \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/smes_en). Last access March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

## Quantitative indicators on female EU SMEs in Europe

### Historic evolution of the phenomenon of internationalisation

To track the phenomenon of internationalisation, it is possible to find available data only from a gender-neutral point of view. It is possible to list numbers of how many SMEs represent the three sectors involved in E4F: Food, Fashion, Handicraft. Data show statistics in 2020.

- Food and Drink: 290,000 SMEs – making up 1.69% of the entire industry in Europe<sup>2</sup>.
- Fashion and Textile: there is not a precise number of SMEs. This is because European textile and fashion companies are predominantly SMEs. In fact, they directly employ 1.69 million people, 70% of whom are women, representing 3.38 % in Europe<sup>3</sup>.
- Handicraft: no quantitative data available for this sector.



Source: Webarometer, p. 8.

In 2018, before the pandemic a report was conducted by the European Commission about taxation costs for SMEs in Europe, entitled *Study on tax compliance costs for SMEs*. It shows that the cost of internationalisation/externalisation of SMEs reached an average between € 3.000 – € 7.000.

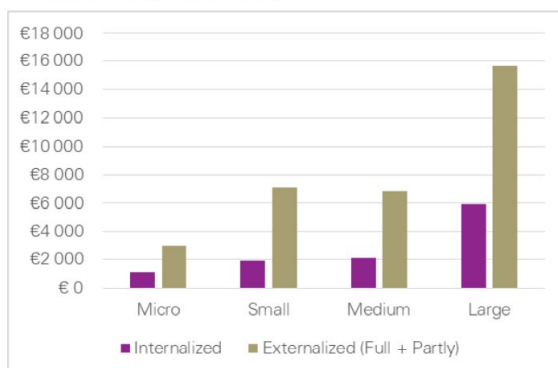
<sup>2</sup>Food Drink Europe, *SME*, 2022, <https://www.fooddrinkeurope.eu/policy-area/smes/>. Last access March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>Webarometer, *A Survey of Women Entrepreneurs in Europe 2020*, 2020, [https://wegate.eu/sites/default/files/wegate\\_webarometer\\_2020.pdf](https://wegate.eu/sites/default/files/wegate_webarometer_2020.pdf). Last access April 22, 2022.

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### Additional SCM figures

Figure 126: Average tax compliance costs for CIT by size of enterprises and by internalisation/outsourcing



Source: KPMG (2018).

Source: EU Commission, *Study on tax compliance costs for SMEs*, p. 258.

Nowadays, it is not still possible to define the average reached by the costs of internationalisation, as studies are still being conducted. Moreover, it is possible to think that general taxation costs had probably increased since the pandemic started. As a result, tax fragmentation between EU member states had raised. “...revenue lost as a result of corporate tax avoidance range from EUR 36-37 billion to EUR 160-190...”<sup>4</sup>.

### Gender and demographic connotation

As already mentioned at proposal, E4F highlighted that EU female SMEs represent only 18% of EU exporting SMEs. This reveals a strong gender gap within Europe, considering that 62% of the jobs dependent on exports are occupied by men compared to 38% by women<sup>5</sup>. This is confirmed also by seeing the special distribution of female SMEs in Europe. A survey conducted by the WEgate Platform (“A Survey of Women Entrepreneurs in Europe”, 2020) revealed the following statement:

“Women make up 52% of the total European population, but only 34.4% of the European Union (EU) self-employed and 30% of start-up entrepreneurs. Given their creativity, entrepreneurial capacities and talents, they are an under-utilised resource that could become the new driving force for the next generation of Europe”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>European Parliament, *Impact of national tax reforms on the EU economy*, p. 2. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0023\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0023_EN.pdf).

<sup>5</sup>Zornitsa Kutlina-Dimitrova, Jose Manuel Rueda-Cantucho, Nuno Sousa, *Female participation in EU exporting activities: jobs and wages*, p. 3, EU Trade, 2019. Link: [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2019/september/tradoc\\_158372.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2019/september/tradoc_158372.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>Webarometer, *A Survey of Women Entrepreneurs in Europe 2020*, p. 2, 2020, [https://wegate.eu/sites/default/files/wegate\\_webarometer\\_2020.pdf](https://wegate.eu/sites/default/files/wegate_webarometer_2020.pdf). Last access April 22, 2022.

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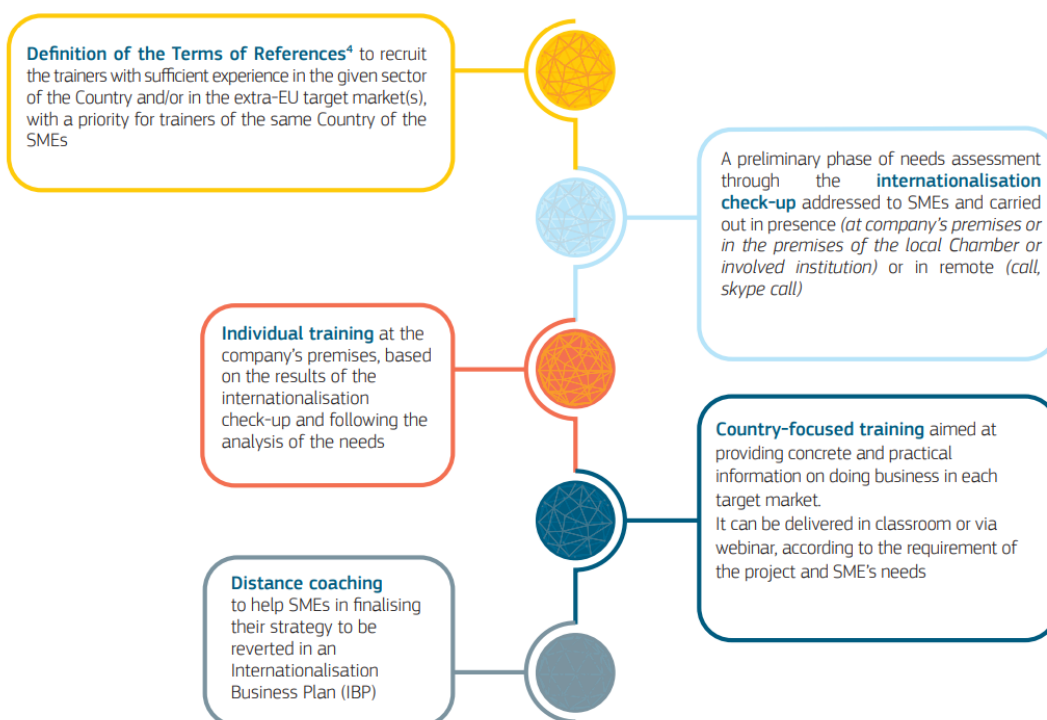
## Qualitative indicators on female EU SMEs in EU: skills-gap and need assessments

Economic trends and dynamics concerning SMEs in Europe have been impacted by the pandemic. According to an update status report shared by the European Commission, in 2020 the number of European SMEs decreased to 1.3 %, employment in SMEs to 1,7 %. More than 60 % of SMEs experienced a decline in turnover, and around 66 % of them have postponed investment decisions or scaled back investments. Further studies and forecasts reveal that SME value added is unlikely to return to 2019 levels by the end of 2021<sup>7</sup>.

These premises below confirm that E4F could serve to help SMEs to acquire knowledge and operational tools in managing their internal staff and approaching foreign markets. This is also confirmed by the WEgate report on Women entrepreneurs' condition in 2021, according to which female SMEs are in the need of restoring their confidence in conducting business<sup>8</sup>.

In this sense, E4F is in line with the guidelines defined by the European Commission to support internationalisation of SMEs. According to the related handbook - *HOW TO ASSIST EUROPEAN SMEs IN THEIR INTERNATIONALISATION PROCESS. A Guidebook for the European Business Support Organisations* - SMEs in Europe need specific training and coaching programs to acquire relevant skills to internationalise their businesses. To do so, the implemented sessions should enable SMEs to turn challenges into opportunities and promote the "upgrading of skills" to face globalised markets and develop competitiveness. Moreover, the European Commission clarifies that the training should not be limited to the early stage of

*The workflow of a training programme can be structured as follows:*



<sup>7</sup>European Commission, *Annual Single Market Report 2021*, 2021. Link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021SC0351>. Last access May 16th, 2022.

<sup>8</sup>Webarometer, *A Survey of Women Entrepreneurs in Europe 2021*, p. 13, 2021, [https://wegate.eu/sites/default/files/wegate\\_webarometer\\_2021.pdf](https://wegate.eu/sites/default/files/wegate_webarometer_2021.pdf). Last access May 16th, 2022.

internationalisation, but it is necessary to continue the training once the international strategy has been developed<sup>9</sup>.

As indicated in the model below, this theoretical model is applicable to all sectors withing the SMEs in the Member States in Europe. The focus of the needs assessment for E4F curricula regards the development of a strategy to expand SMEs' business. In this sense, this confirms E4F necessity to develop the "thinking-out-of-the-box" attitude. For instance, the E4F training curricula could involve in didactical modules knowledge on how to write an International Business Plan (IBP). In the following box, there is a list of elements that could be integrated in E4F top priorities.

E4F PRIORITIES	ELEMENTS TO BE INTEGRATED IN E4F TRAININGS
1) Mindset and Ambition	Increase the confidence on staff's skills in the SME
2) Skills and competence of staff	Analyse the structure of an International Business Plan
3) Understanding potential markets	Knowledge on foreign markets to approach
4) Networking	Taking courses to boost digital competences to find new clients abroad, participate national events and workshops
5) Staff bandwidth	Introduce the staff to Internationalisation scenario, business-oriented needs, analyse case studies and successful stories and challenges

For this reason, E4F modules will be inspired to the so-called European Qualification Framework (EQF), established in 2008 by the European Parliament and Council. It is a Framework which provides a common reference as a translation tool to make different national qualifications (such as certificates or diplomas) more comparable within Member States in Europe. Here, national referencing is achieved by referencing each National Quality level to the correspondent EQ level. The EQF has 8 levels corresponding to the academic qualification of each subject. Levels were revised in 2017, seeking to support students, workers, jobseekers, employers, training, and education institutions<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup>European Commission, *HOW TO ASSIST EUROPEAN SMEs IN THEIR INTERNATIONALISATION PROCESS. A Guidebook for the European Business Support Organisations*, p. 30, 2019. Link: <https://www.ihctg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EU-Internationalisation-Guidebook-May2019.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup>Cedefop, *EQF Framework*, 2021. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/european-qualifications-framework-eqf>.



## Opportunities: training available and operational tools

In 2021, due to the negative effects caused by the pandemic, the Institutions in Europe decided to pass a new economic Plan to give financial aid to member EU States. It is the so-called “Next Generation EU” that will also transmit loans to small businesses in Europe to be smarter, more innovative, and stronger<sup>11</sup>.

To boost internationalisation opportunities abroad, Europe gives SMEs the possibility to take part in online courses providing operational tools to acquire knowledge on general management aspects in their SMEs. Specifically for women, there are four well-known digital platforms that they can use to boost their knowledge on how to conduct their businesses: WEGATE, European IP Helpdesk, the European Training Foundation (ETF), ifempower.

### 1) WEGATE

Didactical opportunities to boost the potential of female SMEs in Europe is given by the digital Platform WEGate, launched by the European Commission in 2016. It provides support and tools to female entrepreneurs, for instance information and links on access to training, mentoring, advice, and how to find business networking opportunities abroad. There is also the possibility to filter research of trainings by country. WEGATE offers a section dedicated to specific Training Programs & Organisation.

In this sense, WEGATE and the European Helpdesk represent operational tools to acquire specific knowledge on topics around internal SMEs’ management. At the same time, they provide a catching-attitude to allow women-led businesses go beyond the gender gap and boost their exports abroad. Thanks to these tolls, many SMEs could catch opportunities in fashion. Thanks to these training curricula, SMEs make up most businesses in the fashion sector in Europe. A study (*Support report mapping sustainable fashion opportunities for SMEs*, 2019) highlighted that an opportunity to boost SMEs’ internationalisation in this sector is to make Fashion sustainable. This relies on a wider use of digitalisation, that allows the customisation of clothes online<sup>12</sup>.

Moreover, opportunities are available for the food sector. In Europe, SMEs in food sector are exposed to global trends and they need consistent support to continue developing the latest innovation. As in the case of Fashion sector, also the Food one could improve internationalisation chances becoming more sustainable<sup>13</sup>.

Indeed, there isn’t any result for opportunities in Handicraft sector at EU level. Neither the European Commission nor any other Agency shows any statics or feature that could suggest possible ways to facilitate the internationalisation of female Handicraft SMEs.

### 2) European Helpdesk

At EU level, an operation tool can be the digital training program called EU specialised helpdesks – training sessions on intellectual property rights. It provides free-of-charge support to help European SMEs and beneficiaries of EU-funded research projects manage their Internet Protocols in the context of transnational business or EU research and innovation programmes. In the case of EU specialised helpdesk, modules of

<sup>11</sup>European Commission, *Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard*, 2021. Link: [https://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_finance/recovery-and-resilience-scoreboard/assets/thematic\\_analysis/3\\_SME.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/recovery-and-resilience-scoreboard/assets/thematic_analysis/3_SME.pdf).

<sup>12</sup>European Commission, *Study on 'Mapping sustainable fashion opportunities for SMEs*, 2019. Link: [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/news/study-mapping-sustainable-fashion-opportunities-smes-2019-09-03\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/news/study-mapping-sustainable-fashion-opportunities-smes-2019-09-03_en).

<sup>13</sup>Food Drink Europe, *2021 Sustainability ambitions from Food Drink Europe*, 2021. Website: <https://www.fooddrinkeurope.eu/2021-sustainability-ambitions-from-fooddrinkeurope/>. Last access May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

trainings and webinars sessions are not tailored, as they offer knowledge only at digital level on how SMEs can spread their businesses and disseminate their products abroad.

### **3) The European Training Foundation (ETF)**

The ETF – European Training Foundation – promotes tailored trainings to support SMEs in Europe. For instance, ETF offers a training to clarify SMEs' needs to help them to internationalise their businesses<sup>14</sup>. moreover, ETF shares with public in Europe policy briefing papers periodically. Here, it is possible to find a brief policy document exposing thoughts on the impact of the digitalisation and the Covid-19 pandemic on the internationalisation of SMEs. According to this document, lessons learned about the internationalisation rely on the construction of capacity building within the SME staff<sup>15</sup>.

As evidence, the above-mentioned policy paper explains that SMEs should receive mentoring sessions to understand how to move into new markets, especially internationally, also contributes to extend their competency base. In this sense, the staff is in the need of employing staff for internationalisation/export activities are strongly recommended. Therefore, a continuous learning process within the company represents a good practice<sup>16</sup>.

### **4) Ifempower**

In Europe, there are a few courses available for developing female entrepreneurship. An example can be made considering an Erasmus+ project developed in 2018, "ifempower". Lead by HÉTFA Research Institute Hungary, it was implemented by Partners from the following European countries: Iceland, Romania, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Germany. This project aimed at boosting the female participation in European entrepreneurship, implementing mentoring programs and online courses. These ones were addressed to women to develop their personal engagement in self-employment and entrepreneurship, especially in SMEs. Moreover, students from several University had the chance to enrol for broadening their knowledge on entrepreneurship and related topics. It is important to say that ifempower modules have been used in Higher Education field, as the project itself was developed in the context of university courses and specialised studies.

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<sup>14</sup>European Training Foundation, *Supporting Skills for SMEs*. Website: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/supporting-skills-smes>. Last access May 18th, 2022.

<sup>15</sup>Interreg Europe, *Internationalisation of SMEs. A policy Brief from the Policy Learning Platform on SME Competitiveness*, p. 2, 2021. Link : <https://www.interregeurope.eu/sites/default/files/2021-12/Policy%20brief%20on%20internationalisation%20of%20SMEs.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup>Interreg Europe, *Internationalisation of SMEs. A policy Brief from the Policy Learning Platform on SME Competitiveness*, pp. 13-14, 2021. Link: <https://www.interregeurope.eu/sites/default/files/2021-12/Policy%20brief%20on%20internationalisation%20of%20SMEs.pdf>.



## Challenges

In this section, it is important to analyse lessons learned from research conducted in ifempower project about internal managing of women-led businesses in SMEs. Thanks to this, it is possible to expose one of related case studies on finding new operational ways to boost female entrepreneurs' potential in Europe.

The case study mentioned here represents the IO1 of ifempower Erasmus+ project, known as *IFEMPOWER study on female entrepreneurs and females in SMEs serving as methodological guide*. According to this qualitative research, female entrepreneurs' major challenge is the fact of feeling an excess of tension as they strongly tend to avoid risks and the insecurities of being an entrepreneur<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, the study highlights that women need didactical and practical support. Here, this policy paper exposes that women entrepreneurs' threat is caused by the lack of impact of higher education in giving knowledge about how to manage the firm. In this sense, this situation does not enable SMEs to construct an international mindset (and not to boost exports abroad)<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, lesson learned regard the fact that the open and international mindset should be set up early and spread within the staff members. Here, it is possible to infer those challenges for female SMEs on how to construct cross-border relations with foreign clients and markets. As exposed in the "Opportunities" section (page 5 of this report), what follows concerns the fact that in Europe operational tools are available. Despite this fact, challenges for women-led businesses could be analysed from a didactical-theoretical point of view. The main issue is that the existing training curricula in Europe are not target-oriented. As evidence, the selected examples show that these curricula appear to be as separated modules, and not as a unique-general knowledge.

In the case of the European IP helpdesk, the focus is on how to be confident in managing the use of Internet Protocols in a SME<sup>19</sup>. The IP module provides knowledge on the following topics:

- Drafting IP inventory
- Establishing a strategy
- Finding potential business Partners
- Knowing local IP rules
- Choosing the right business model

In that case, this online available tip presents three major challenges to its users.

- It only focuses on digital aspects of Business Management, as shown by the module "IP Management in International Business". Therefore, the built capacity is exclusively at digital-practical level, and not at mindful level.
- The training is accessible only by submitting a "support form" to the IP Team who manages the Platform.

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<sup>17</sup>Interreg Europe, *Internationalisation of SMEs. A policy Brief from the Policy Learning Platform on SME Competitiveness*, p, 31, 2021. Link: <https://www.interregeurope.eu/sites/default/files/2021-12/Policy%20brief%20on%20internationalisation%20of%20SMEs.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup>Interreg Europe, *Internationalisation of SMEs. A policy Brief from the Policy Learning Platform on SME Competitiveness*, p, 53, 2021. Link: <https://www.interregeurope.eu/sites/default/files/2021-12/Policy%20brief%20on%20internationalisation%20of%20SMEs.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup>European IP Helpdesk, *Basic IP Knowledge*, [https://intellectual-property-helpdesk.ec.europa.eu/regional-helpdesks/european-ip-helpdesk/europe-e-learning\\_en](https://intellectual-property-helpdesk.ec.europa.eu/regional-helpdesks/european-ip-helpdesk/europe-e-learning_en). Last access May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

- The training is not tailored, as it addresses the IP topic only to specific businesses, such as: life sciences, Biotechnology, general Software, Pharma, Artificial Intelligence.

Surely, this training curriculum represents a real challenge to entrepreneurs who wish to acquire new competences on how to manage their Internet networks. The fact is that this kind of knowledge is only given into an internal perspective, from the management point of view, and not from a practical point of view. In here, there isn't any recall on how to internationalise. In this sense, the E4F OER Platform combines both digital and attitudes to let SMEs "thinking-outside-the-box".



## Conclusions

The finding of this report could be resumed in several bullet points. A first overview could be shown in relation to the situation of female SMEs in Europe.

- In Europe, there aren't any statistics available on how to conduct business in Food, Fashion and Handicraft represented by female SMEs.
- Available trainings at European level are not tailored, as they offer knowledge only for specific topics. An example is provided by European IP desk, which offers trainings to SMEs on how to manage their IPs.
- Any statistic or precise information on gender distribution in European SMEs is still missing. Moreover, precise data on exports from female SMEs have not been available yet.

Here, it is possible to expose a lesson learned coming from the lack of confidence that women-entrepreneurs have. In fact, they are in the need of constructing cross-border relations with foreign clients and markets. In this sense, E4F could define new programs in Europe that could be more target-oriented than the existing ones.

Secondly, other statements concern the existing training curricula about boosting competitiveness of SMEs in Europe. The entire report highlights that, in Europe, there is a wide choice of mentoring and coaching programs regarding business, such as the tools mentioned in the Opportunity section (WEgate, ETF sessions, European Helpdesk, ifempower). As a matter of fact, these didactical tools have been very useful as they have been enabling women entrepreneurs conducting internal needs assessment and overtake their lack of confidence. This is because these tools allow them to gain knowledge on how to manage financial affairs and internal staff issues, how to gain visibility and develop an international mindset.

In this overview, training and coaching programs find the economic support in economic Plans defined in Europe. As mentioned in this report, due to the pandemic, fortunately all Member States can receive financial help approved by the European Parliament and as defined in the Recovery and Resilience Plan. In this sense, women-led businesses all around Europe will have the chance to boost their internal potential and increase their exports abroad.

A final consideration must be stated about E4F project. The findings of this report show that the five top priorities in the project need to be implemented across Europe. Women entrepreneurs and female start-uppers will receive a new type of mentoring/coaching session on how to make their business international. E4F is also in line with the objective of making the new business sustainable and digitally available, in the purpose of going beyond the trade restrictions imposed by Covid-19. In this sense, E4F will contribute to balance the gender gap, to increase of exports registered by female SMEs in Europe and detect new statistics about the internationalisation of Fashion, Food and Handicraft sectors.



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