

SWOT ANALYSIS WORKSHOP

OCTOBER 8th, 2025

On October 8th and 9th, the WOMEX project held its first Interregional Policy Learning Event (IPLE) in Barcelona, organized under the framework of Interreg Europe and co-funded by the European Union, under the theme “Women and Internationalization”.

In this context, on October 8th, a SWOT session was conducted to diagnose, among all the representatives of the regions comprising the project consortium, (i) the strengths of women leaders that facilitate internationalization, (ii) the weaknesses and limitations of women leaders that hinder internationalization, (iii) threats from negative external factors in the environment affecting the internationalization of professional women and their business contexts, and (iv) opportunities, meaning positive external factors that can be leveraged to promote the internationalization of women-owned or women-led businesses.

This session was facilitated by Dr. Sara Berbel, PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Barcelona and a strategic advisor on leadership, organizational well-being, and equality. Dr. Berbel has held prominent public positions, including Director General for Equal Opportunities at the Generalitat de Catalunya and Municipal Manager at the Ajuntament de Barcelona, and she is also the author of multiple books on female empowerment and leadership.

The aim of this session was, on the one hand, to promote collective reflection among all the public servants participating in the project and, on the other, to assess the participants' level of knowledge regarding the project's theme.

Dr. Berbel provided a compilation of the conclusions reached by the participants, which we reproduce below without adding ad hoc conclusions. What stands out is the sophistication of the analyses, the high level of engagement and participation of the attendees, and their strong connection to the project's theme.

Some statements appear in multiple sections because they can be either an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the circumstances, and because they were proposed with different nuances by the participating women.

All the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities described below can be considered as factors for change for the women themselves, as well as a basis for future strategies for public administrations in the various European countries involved in their development.

We want to thank Dr. Berbel for her support over the past months on the WOMEX project, and especially for the design and implementation of the aforementioned session.

SWOT Matrix: Internationalization of SMEs led by women.

A) STRENGTHS (Positive internal factors)

Advantages and internal capabilities of women leaders that facilitate internationalization.

Key competences needed for internationalization:

- ✓ Self-confidence, security.
- ✓ Business competences.
- ✓ Cultural and intercultural competences.
- ✓ Languages and understanding the meaning of different languages.
- ✓ Communication and assertiveness skills.
- ✓ Personal Skills Development.
- ✓ Fostering authentic leadership.
- ✓ Adaptability: Innovation and flexibility.
- ✓ Understanding the *background*, learning from experience (how you grew up, how you developed) and from your own social background and the environment.

Networks and support needed for internationalization:

- ✓ Creation of national and international women's networks.
- ✓ Leveraging existing networks and formal or informal networking situations.

Learning and good practices:

- ✓ Good practices that show positive stories.
- ✓ Putting into practice the knowledge acquired over the years and one's own and others' experiences.

B) WEAKNESSES (Negative internal factors)

Limitations and shortcomings of women leaders or their companies or projects that hinder internationalization.

Cultural/social biases and barriers:

- ✓ Social and business prejudices, internal and external, against women leaders (*women are not good leaders, instead they are very competent as "second" to whoever is in charge; they are too emotional, they use "soft" skills that are useless in times of crisis, etc.*).
- ✓ Outdated stereotypes about professional women.
- ✓ Fear of innovation and lack of flexibility on the part of organizations and companies.
- ✓ Gender differences and sexism in the organization and in society.
- ✓ Lack of female visibility in decision-making positions in the business and political spheres.

Inequalities and lack of resources:

- ✓ Wage inequality increased in decision-making positions.
- ✓ Lack of financial support, especially for *start-ups* but also for business development and internationalization of women's businesses.
- ✓ A more limited budget than in men's projects, which makes internationalization costs more expensive.
- ✓ Development of small projects due to different socialization received, more linked to the environment.

Work-life balance and responsibilities that hinder internationalization:

- ✓ *Family responsibilities.*
- ✓ *Age differences: Women with caregiving responsibilities.*
- ✓ *Multiple work interruptions throughout life due to the need to care.*
- ✓ *Need to spend time with the company and travel a lot.*

Access and training:

- ✓ Difficulties in accessing training or learning the required skills (this is the next necessary step for the proper development of managerial work).
- ✓ Intercultural difficulties (religion, ethical values, education).

Psychological barriers and personal management:

- ✓ Lack of self-confidence and need to feel prepared.
- ✓ Excessive perfectionism, unlimited self-demand, and difficulty adopting the "better done than perfect" mentality.
- ✓ Some women tend to identify with the hegemonic masculine management style, understood as one that reproduces authoritarian, hierarchical, aggressive, and competitive attitudes.
- ✓ Loneliness (often a price to pay).

C) THREATS (Negative external factors)

Risks and obstacles of the environment for the internationalization of women and their business projects.

Market and external barriers:

- ✓ Intercultural difficulties or existing cultural barriers in relation to the presence of women in business environments.
- ✓ Existence of "different labels" for men and women (e.g. *They are powerful, potent negotiators, and instead women are perceived as horrible/strong/ambitious/emotional/hysterical*).
- ✓ High-level positions reproduce the system of inequality (e.g. *if she cannot be "reachable", she hires another woman at home to be "reachable"*).

Organizational culture/country:

- ✓ Prejudice and discrimination against women in various countries (including the Mediterranean countries, which are very classic in this regard).
- ✓ Hostile work environment (men are not comfortable with female bosses).
- ✓ Appearance of sexism explicit.
- ✓ Adaptation or integration: Culture of the country that you are willing to accept. This is a double-edged factor: it can be a threat if the culture is restrictive.

Stereotypes and social/cultural biases:

- ✓ Prejudices and stereotypes against female entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.
- ✓ Cultural difficulties/barriers and outdated stereotypes in different cultures, which hinder internationalization.
- ✓ Family and family pressure that causes female abandonment when women give in to them due to fatigue or inability to resist the pressure.

System of inequality in the work environment:

- ✓ Existing sexism and inequality.
- ✓ Pay inequity and lack of financial support.
- ✓ Top management reproduces the system of inequality that exists in society.
- ✓ There are no women in management positions, or they are a minority, and this prevents their success and visibility, as well as their becoming references for others.
- ✓ Existence of "different labels" and especially negative ones for strong women in negotiations.

Lack of references:

- ✓ Absence of references for women in the business world.
- ✓ Passive acceptance of questions about maternity/dismissal without having answers (largely due to lack of references).

D) OPPORTUNITIES (Positive external factors)

Conditions or elements of the environment that can be used in favor of the internationalization of women's businesses.

Institutional support and public policies:

- ✓ EU gender equality policies.
- ✓ Public funds from the country where the project is developed and from the EU.
- ✓ Replicable good public policy practices:
 - Gender quotas: e.g. 40% of the members must be women.
 - Promoting gender sensitivity in public tenders.
 - Public promotional documents and social clauses for internationalization projects led by women.
 - Reporting for the measurement and advancement of women (e.g. through the SDGs).

Support Programs and Networks:

- ✓ Networks, mentoring and *partnerships* that create new opportunities for internationalization.
- ✓ Specific personalized mentoring programs: e.g. *1 to 1 mentoring, E-mentoring*.
- ✓ Participate in and join women's associations.
- ✓ Need to promote greater *sisterhood*.
- ✓ To have universities that support different countries with their studies and research.
- ✓ Promotion of mixed networks (men and women) to overcome stereotypes.
- ✓ Active search for mentors and references.

Markets and culture:

- ✓ Access to new emerging markets for entrepreneurs and businesswomen.
- ✓ Identify the culture of the country you are going to work with and stipulate the limits of what is acceptable without betraying yourself.
- ✓ Global networking opportunities.
- ✓ Leveraging subsidies and transparency to promote female talent.

Social change and business culture:

- ✓ Promotion of co-responsibility (that men are incorporated into the care of dependent people in the family) and the need for good public care services.
- ✓ Driving top-down change in companies if management believes in equality.

- ✓ Eliminate informal pressures towards women (clothing, motherhood, physical appearance).
- ✓ Changing the narrative to show that equality benefits the company (and eventually everyone).
- ✓ Making visible the "invisible care" that is mostly carried out by women.