

The logo for WeRin, featuring the word "WeRin" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "i" is lowercase and has a small orange dot above it. To the right of the text is a stylized sunburst or flower icon composed of several overlapping, colorful segments in shades of purple, pink, orange, and yellow.

WeRin

A black and white photograph of two women in a professional setting. The woman on the left is smiling and looking towards the woman on the right. The woman on the right is seen in profile, looking back at the first woman. They appear to be in a meeting or collaborative work environment. The background shows office windows and a whiteboard.

Women Entrepreneurship and Education

e-zine

WeRin Project

| Issue 2/February 2022





Welcome to the WeRin Project Newsletter!

We are delighted to introduce you to the bi-annual magazine dedicated to Women Entrepreneurs in Regional Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (WeRin), a forward-thinking European initiative with a team of 14 partners who are passionate about increasing the share of female graduate entrepreneurs.

Through this project, we, a group of academics and practitioners passionate about entrepreneurship, aim to make entrepreneurship education and support programmes more inclusive for women.

What is in this issue?

Our second issue brings you insights from the recent Think Tanks that the WeRin consortium organized as the next step after the investigation phase of the project.

We begin our second issue by placing the spotlight on a selection of fascinating women entrepreneurs. Hear advice from Christina Calje (Autheos) (p. 5), and Marcella Wijngarden (Project Cece) (p. 8).

Next, catch up on the latest news from the WeRin project, including an overview of the regional scans that consortium partners have undertaken, detailing the current state of women's entrepreneurship across 5 different European regions (p. 11). Additionally, hear about the insights from the WeRin Project's International (p. 13) and Local Think Tank events (p.15).

To conclude, meet a selection of our project partners Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands), Munster Technological University (Ireland) and the Faculty of Organization and Informatics of the University of Zagreb (Croatia) (p. 25).

We wish you a pleasant read!

*University Industry Innovation Network (UIIN)
on behalf of the WeRin Project Consortium*



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Meet the Change-Makers



Christina Calje

Co-founder of Autheos

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Picture from thenextspeaker.com

Sector or industry

Internet Marketing Services

Year started as entrepreneur

2009 (company founded in 2016)

Location

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Attributes

Ambitious and resourceful.

Motto

"If you don't ask, you don't get"

About Christina

Christina Calje is an entrepreneur, co-founder of Autheos, a marketing technology platform that uses artificial intelligence to inform video strategy of brands and personalize the video experience for their consumers.

Christina was named by EUtop50 as 'Top Woman Entrepreneur', by Inspiring Fifty as one of the Netherlands' most inspiring women in tech and by VIVA 400 as an 'inspiring, ambitious woman who excels in the tech field'.

"Have a positive mindset, this will bring you to have so much energy and confidence and therefore allow you to take the first step."

Christina was born and raised in New York City, from a Puerto Rican mother and Surinamese father. She moved to Europe 12 years ago and has lived in the Netherlands for about eight years.

Something that her mother taught her from an early age was not to be beholden to her environment or her circumstances, and to understand that if there is something you want to accomplish, there are several different paths possible to create those opportunities for yourself. One of the clearest expressions of that ethos was Christina's education. Whether it was her mother's responsibility or hers, they always made a great effort and tried to find ways to get access to affordable education in high tier institutions.

After high school, Christina was able to go to one of the top liberal arts colleges in the United States and graduated from Latin American Studies, while having acquired a certain amount of specialized knowledge about economics. Later, she studied an MBA in International Finance, Financial Instruments and Markets from New York University – Leonard N. Stern School of Business by means of a full fellowship. She worked at Goldman Sachs in New York and London, where she had several roles in finance.

Christina's Entrepreneurial Journey

After a couple of years working at Goldman Sachs, Christina felt disconnected to the overall vision and mission of the company and then realised that her morals and priorities were different from those of the people who were working there. That is when she decided to step back from finance and shifted to technology, which marked the beginning of her entrepreneurial career and entrance into the tech sector. According to Christina, that meant a big leap for her in terms of uncertainty and entering a completely new field, where she needed to validate that the skillset and experience that she had built up was still relevant.

Christina's first company was a consultancy practice and as she puts it, she "loved being able to have such direct control over the trajectory of the company in terms of growth, strategy and deciding who would be working around me". Since then, Christina's professional life has been all about entrepreneurship, and one of the most remarkable and successful examples is Autheos, a company that delivers brand and product videos to the e-commerce market and whose market share is higher than 70% in the Benelux.

When she started Christina did not have any experience in the industry and needed to have many conversations to understand the challenges that the field was facing.

Autheos was co-founded in 2016, when Christina was approached to participate in the creation and to evolve the concept in a way that the monetization strategy could be broadened and more clients would be brought in, making the company scalable outside of the Benelux. When she started, Christina did not have any experience in the industry and needed to have many conversations to understand the challenges that the field was facing, how to monitor the performance of the content that was being created and how to qualify content as successful or not.

As she puts it: "Before Autheos, I had not co-founded a company. I was in the leadership role of a venture-backed company and that made me really yearn to have that ownership component. I was approached to co-found Autheos and that gave me a different type of freedom to create a product that I thought was missing in the market and could also align with some of my personal ambitions for the marketing and advertising industry".

These days, Christina has been taking a more active role in investing in start-ups and helping to advise pre-seed and seed-stage start-up founders who are launching their products or putting their minimum viable products (MVPs) in the market. She is also working with other investors to try to connect those that she thinks have a great ethos with founders that have great potential, in order to bring more balance, respect and support to the ecosystem.

In short, Christina's goal is to expand her network and connect with other people who share similar values to hers from a societal impact perspective and who are looking to create more equity balance in the world from a gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic point of view.

Inspiration

Christina feels inspired by women entrepreneurs such as Jessica Alba, Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez, who have proven their detractors wrong and, by means of their humility and hard work, have brought immense growth to their companies, which are now worth billions.

Advice

Christina's advice to girls and women who want to realise their dreams is :

1. Don't let the fear of what someone else might think deter you from taking the path of what you think you want to become.
2. Have a positive mindset, this will bring you so much energy and confidence and therefore allow you to take the first step.
3. Share your thoughts and ambitions with other people. This will help you to find people that can support you, either through collaborations or advice.

4. Discover new networks using resources like Meetup to find groups of people who are doing similar, or different, things as you and with whom you can establish a mutually beneficial relationship where you can discuss and learn.



“Don't let the fear of what someone else might think deter you from following the path of what you think you want to become.”



Marcella Wijngaarden

Co-founder of Project Cece

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Sector or industry

Ethical and Sustainable Clothing

Number of employees

4 employees and rotating interns

Year started as entrepreneur

2016

Location

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Age

27

Attributes

Curious, hard-working and ambitious.

Motto

"Do things that make you happy and that make the world happy too"

About Marcella

Marcella Wijngaarden is a 27-year-old woman entrepreneur, co-founder and Chief Tech. of Project Cece, an online marketplace for fair and sustainable fashion.

Project Cece aims to

- (1) Concentrate the offer for fair and sustainable fashion.
- (2) Make it available to the consumer who is interested in purchasing sustainable clothes.
- (3) Solve some of the issues related to clothing manufacturing by raising awareness of the values that are driving the customer's mindset.

The online platform offers a range of more than 100 [ethical fashion stores](#) and over 200 fair trade brands, resulting in over 25,000 products.

Marcella grew-up in the Southeast of Amsterdam and after high school, she studied physics at the University of Amsterdam and subsequently studied a master's degree in astrophysics. This opened the door to the possibility of doing a PhD in Mathematical Sciences at the University of Southampton in London, which Marcella is currently finalising. Marcella became interested in physics and astrophysics by reading a book which triggered her to read more. She was divided between studying philosophy and physics but decided to study physics as to her both fields are answering the same question but using different approaches.

Marcela defines herself as curious, a hard worker and ambitious. She believes it is important to do things that make you happy and make the world happier. For her, success is doing something that has an impact and is aligned with her values.

Marcela's Entrepreneurial Journey

Marcella co-founded Project Cece in 2015 along with her sister, Melissa, and one of her friends Noor Veenhoven while she was doing her master's in astrophysics. Project Cece stands for Project Conscious Clothing and is a search engine for sustainable fashion using smart technology to combine all fair and sustainable clothing offered online in one place. Project Cece was born while she was doing a minor in programming during her master's and realised serendipitously that she could develop a tool that would make it easy for consumers to buy ethical and sustainable clothes. Launched in the Netherlands in 2016, Project Cece expanded to the UK and is now expanding into the rest of Europe.

The turning point in their entrepreneurial journey was an invitation to a start-up bootcamp from one of the most important start-up groups in Europe called the Family. This event gave Marcella and Project Cece the opportunity to learn about business models, start-up-related concepts and different visions and perspectives, which was key in evolving from a proof of concept to a sustainable business.

Author: Jose Villagran (UIN)

As a woman, Marcella has faced challenges with regards to the fact that she is a female entrepreneur but also Chief Tech. of the company. Marcella has experienced condescension from potential investors during fundraising stages and people addressing her as Marcelo or Marcel as if they could not imagine a woman overseeing a company. There are other examples where Marcella experienced sexism hiding behind certain comments, or implicit in the way in which something is phrased, even coming from women trying to help at women-led entrepreneurial events.

Advice

Marcella has some words of advice for women and girls who want to realize their dreams: do not let perfectionism stop you and make you believe that your product is not yet good enough to be launched; and try to find a team that knows about what you're doing, or people that you can run ideas by, even if it is a group who are working on their own projects. These interactions can provide you with valuable information and beneficial insights.



Image: The Project Cece Team, alumni.uva.nl

“Do not let perfectionism stop you and make you believe that your product is not yet good enough to be launched.”

News from WeRin



We are winners!

We're excited and proud to share with you that the WeRin project has won an award in the first Social EU Awards. The awards run by [Social EU](#) is an EU project working to develop and test an innovative training approach and methodology for EU project managers on how to best use social media.

WeRin was recognised for **Best Editorial Plan**

The judges commented, "The project channels are marked with constant posting where the visual identity is clear and visible and the tone of voice and the posting style is clearly oriented to inclusion: perfectly in line with the project aims."

Thank you for your support and following our updates on Twitter [@WeRinproject](#) & LinkedIn [WeRin: Overview](#) | [LinkedIn](#)



Insights from the WeRin Regional Scans

Author: Tasha Day (UIIN)

The WeRin Regional Scan was an extensive research endeavour that took place across five participating regions: Zagreb, Croatia; North Rhine Westphalia-NRW, Germany; Cork, Ireland; Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, the Netherlands; and Istanbul, Turkey. The scan aimed to identify the current state of gender-inclusivity in the entrepreneurial ecosystem of each region, including within academic and non-academic entrepreneurship education and support programmes.

The regional scans are intended to inform regional stakeholders about the current state of women's entrepreneurship in the region and provide a starting point for the development of potential interventions to improve this situation. The data from the regional scans was synthesised to uncover common challenges across Europe, which the WeRin consortium will now work together to find solutions for.

The scan looked at the macro level, to uncover the structural state of women's entrepreneurship in the region, including national policies, strategies, and cultural and economic influences, combined with the characterisation of female entrepreneurs in the region.

The meso level on the other hand looked at regional support policies, services, and initiatives. The insights came from interviews with four different stakeholder groups from each region: entrepreneurship educators, students and alumni from entrepreneurship education programmes, female entrepreneurs embedded in the regional ecosystem, as well as entrepreneurship programme managers and

other stakeholders in the ecosystem. Insights from the interviews were sorted according to a criteria developed by project partner [AUAS](#), whilst also allowing for novel themes to emerge from the data. Themes were based around the topics such as role models, offering of education and support programmes and gender stereotypes, amongst others.

Insights

As mentioned above, a synthesis of the issues identified from the scans was collated by project partner [UIIN](#). **Ten core themes** pertaining to **entrepreneurship education** and **support networks**, as well as the wider **ecosystem** emerged from the data.

These issues give us an insight into the current state of the inclusivity of entrepreneurship ecosystems across Europe. Overarchingly, the extent and depth of lived and structural inequalities still existent throughout the continent is striking, and there is a lot of work to be done to dismantle these inequalities.

Each of the five regional scans, as well as the synthesis of commonalities, were presented by project partners at the WeRin International Think Tank on 18th October. The outcomes and synthesis of the regional scans were also used to inform discussion at the five WeRin Regional Think Tanks which took place in November/December 2021. Ultimately, these results will feed into the knowledge creation stage of the WeRin project, as well as the WeRLearnIn approach and guiding principles.

A lack of relevant female role models

A lack of relevant female role models was a common issue across the regions. Case studies used in entrepreneurship classes overwhelmingly relate to male-owned businesses, and guest speakers tend more often than not to be men as well. Educators and programme leaders discussed how much more difficult it was to find female guest speakers, due to their lack of visibility in the ecosystem. Interviewees stressed that, though certainly important, it should not only be a case of showcasing female role models, but rather showcasing relevant, relatable and perhaps local entrepreneurs who aspiring entrepreneurs can look up to as an achievable goal.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, out of all of groups, female entrepreneurs were best able to identify other female entrepreneurs in the ecosystem, whom they thought of as role models. In the future then, it would make sense for educators to look into women's entrepreneurship networks and ask female entrepreneurs themselves whom, including themselves if relevant, they think would be a relevant guest speaker.

Hidden bias

Another overarching theme was hidden bias. The inequality and bias that women face in entrepreneurship often goes unnoticed or at least is not considered as a problem by many ecosystem actors. It is a complex issue; educators, for example might perceive that they treat all their students the same, regardless of gender, but at the same time they may spend more time on or reward students who are more vocal and confident, traits that tend to be more associated with men in entrepreneurship education. In this way, educators may be giving women in entrepreneurship class less attention and support, without realising it. The hidden nature of this bias means that it is swept under the rug and left unaddressed in many cases.

Ecosystem

Entrepreneurship ecosystem still perceived as male space

Stereotypes about women in entrepreneurship still prevalent

Female entrepreneurs have poorer access to funding

Motivations of female entrepreneurs differ from 'traditional' entrepreneurship values

Education

There are a lack of female role models in the entrepreneurship field

There is a hidden bias associated with women in entrepreneurship

There are wider inclusivity issues in the entrepreneurship field

What is missing from (women's) entrepreneurship education?

Support

Women-only networks: integration or segregation?

Balancing entrepreneurship with other commitments

Many thanks to project partners Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS), Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities (ACEEU), Munster Technological University (MTU), University of Zagreb (UniZG) and Istanbul Technical University (ITU) for collecting all this valuable data that will be used to inform practice throughout the duration of the WeRin project.



Picture from Frane Medic, Unsplash

WeRin International Think Tank in Zagreb

Author: Jose Villagran (UIIN)

On October 18th, 2021 the WeRin consortium met to celebrate the occasion of the WeRin International Think Tank and to discuss the insights from the investigation phase of the project, both at a regional and international level. The event took place in a blended format over the course of one and a half days and gathered around 30 representatives from all partner organizations. Representatives were divided between two groups: those attending online and those who met physically in the facilities of one of our partner institutions, the University of Zagreb.

The event kicked-off with the members of the consortium presenting the results from SWOT analyses that they had conducted for each of their regions, namely Zagreb, Croatia; North Rhine Westphalia, Germany; Cork, Ireland; Amsterdam

Metropolitan Area, the Netherlands; and Istanbul, Turkey. The results of the investigation shared many similarities across the different countries and evidenced common international needs such as better support structures and networks for female entrepreneurship, more clear and relatable role models, as well as an earlier implementation of entrepreneurship in education, among others.

For more information on the analysis, please refer to the article “WeRin Regional Scans” on p.11.

Reaching a common understanding

The presentations were followed by a workshop facilitated by UIIN – one of our Dutch partners – that was tailored to guide the participants towards the identification and development of potential solutions to the complex issues that pose an obstacle to the inclusivity of regional entrepreneurship ecosystems and the equality of female entrepreneurs.

From the beginning, the workshop was all hands-on deck. Partners worked collaboratively on a variety of exercises carefully prepared to enable brainstorming and to distill these ideas, as well as lessons learned during the regional scans, through the funnel of the consortium, with the ultimate goal of reaching a consensus on the key issues faced by women in entrepreneurship across Europe.



Image: Unsplash, Headway

Towards solutions

The solution phase was the most collaborative part of the International Think Tank, since it required participants to brainstorm together in teams within a very limited timeframe, which urged them to put the focus on relevant and tangible solutions. The workshop concluded with each team presenting their solution concepts to the rest of the consortium.

The International Think Tank was specifically intended to allow for the cross-regional exchange of ideas and insights, in order to reach a common understanding of the challenges facing women in entrepreneurship across Europe.

Conceived solutions included: the creation of a handbook or toolkit to help women entrepreneurs grow their investment literacy, to tackle the gendered funding gap that exists in entrepreneurship or; training women entrepreneurs in self-promotion to help break down the narrative that the entrepreneurship ecosystem is a male space.

This helped to generate a shared vision of the key issues and the most interesting solutions found by the participants before continuing to pursue the objectives of the project.

The International Think Tank, thus, set a successful example of what would be taking place roughly a month from that day: the period during which partners would host their Local Think Tank events. Comforted by the feeling of being able to perceive and understand the progress of the project up to that date, the partners came away from the event with renewed energy and motivation, prepared to take the next steps towards achieving the overarching goal of empowering educators and entrepreneurship support program managers as facilitators of a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.



Picture from Osman Koycu, from Unsplash

A look at the Turkish Entrepreneurship Ecosystem

Author: Işıl Tosun (İTÜ ARI Teknokent)

On 24th of November 2021, ITU ARI Teknokent and ITU GINOVA partnered up to conduct an online workshop in order to define the underlying ground issues and obstacles that exist towards women in entrepreneurship, and to discover ways to make entrepreneurship education and support programs more inclusive for women. This online **Regional Think Tank** was executed as part of the WeRin project, an ERASMUS+ Knowledge Alliance Programme with a consortium of partners who are passionate about increasing the share of women entrepreneurs in regional ecosystems across Europe, as well as their level of embeddedness within these ecosystems.

The workshop kicked-off with an opening speech from Selma Bahçivanoğlu's (Manager, Incubation and Acceleration Programs at İTÜ ARI Teknokent),

followed by a meet and greet phase, where participants started to get to know each other and hear about the purpose of the think tank that they were attending. Selma closed her address by providing an outline of the event, the issues that would be addressed, and what could be potentially done in order to eliminate gender bias in the Turkish entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Later, Zeynep Erden Bayazit (Associate Director at ITU GINOVA Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation) explained to participants why this workshop would have a significant importance for the future of a gender inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystem in Turkey.

Purpose of the workshop

The underlying question of the workshop was: “What problems related to inclusiveness exist within the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Turkey?”

The programme outline was divided into 3 basic sections:

1. The inclusivity issue in entrepreneurship
2. Issues within the ecosystem from Turkey to Europe
3. Working on concrete solutions

All 21 Think Tank participants were highly engaged with the topic. Participants were divided into 4 online “Discussion Rooms” as; Entrepreneurs, Students, Educators, Program Managers / Stakeholders.

The Think Tank was productive and allowed knowledge to be shared between participants from different backgrounds. Versatility of background was crucial in this context, as it allowed us to hear valuable opinions from differing aspects of entrepreneurship and gain new perspectives.

Key questions of the event

The event addressed questions that have long been looking for answers. The essential problems surrounding these questions were expressed and potential solutions were discussed:

- Achieving equal pay for work of equal value
- Representation of disadvantaged groups
- Promoting work-life balance and the equal sharing of care responsibilities
- Preventing a gender-based bias towards women
- Initiatives to be implemented by the government in the early years of the educational system
- Lack of support programs, projects, and role models directed at female entrepreneurs



At the end of the workshop, participants showed their appreciation by emphasising that the voice of women should be heard, since women’s under-representation in start-ups is, unfortunately, a serious challenge in the region. During the 3-hour session, we created an inclusive and welcoming environment. With the help of this lovely synergy, we can genuinely state that our hope is restored!

This was a much-anticipated workshop that proved to be fruitful for women who are already participating in the ecosystem, as well as paving the path for aspiring entrepreneurs. This workshop aimed to make these women entrepreneurs feel invited to the entrepreneurship scene and that they are an important part of the ecosystem.

“With the synergy created by this session, we can genuinely state that our hope is restored.”



Image: WeRin Regional Think Tank, Amsterdam

Change the Narrative: Celebrate & Acknowledge Diversity

Author: Margot Kemps (Impact Hub Amsterdam)

On November 30th 2021, Impact Hub Amsterdam hosted a Regional Think Tank for the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, together with partners UIIN and AUAS. The Think Tank created a space where entrepreneurs, students, network organisations, policymakers and other regional stakeholders could reflect upon the preliminary findings of the WeRin project and co-create ways forward to develop more gender-inclusive entrepreneurship education, support programs and in the long run, ecosystems.

The Think Tank was opened by Saskia Stoker (WeRin lead researcher from AUAS) by presenting the findings from the recent interviews and literature study in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region. This was followed by two keynotes, from Semra Celebi (Startup Amsterdam) and Julie

Munneke-Tromp (Tiny Library). Semra Celebi shared the ongoing efforts of building networks to empower diversity in the workforce, such as the Amsterdam-based We.Rise. Julie Munneke-Tromp, as a founder of an impact enterprise, shared her day-to-day challenges, i.e. in terms of fundraising or stereotype perception. The conclusion of these keynotes is that a gender-balanced view is much needed for the development of inclusive entrepreneurship.

Insights

Next, partners hosted 27 participants across 3 workshop groups and harvested the following insights that will be further developed and tested in the WeRin project:



Image: Unsplash, Christina @ wocintechchat.com

- Visibility** We should focus on creating opportunities for women to experience entrepreneurship at a young age. It is important to invite female entrepreneurs into educational settings and use social media as a key strategy for visibility. Increased collaboration between networks of female entrepreneurs is seen as vital to strengthen the stories of women and make campaigns more visible.
 - Viability** Women often do not see entrepreneurship as a viable career path, and it is in fact difficult to get women to join existing entrepreneurial programs. This issue needs to be addressed through changing the narrative around female entrepreneurship, combined with higher visibility of female role models.
 - Education** It is also suggested to introduce more women-only programs. We should also allow for more experimenting in support programs; hence, not just striving for perfection, but allowing for women who are early on in the process with their company. Support and incubation programs should also consider lowering financial barriers.
 - Connecting** There is a need for a more diverse palette of female role models in the educational program settings. It should also be
- easier to connect to different role models through various kinds of community building, workshops, and organisational collaboration. It is further suggested to make a shift from role model to peer model for entrepreneurs to connect with women that are at a different stage in their entrepreneurial journey.
- Bias** The perception of female entrepreneurs is biased, for example regarding the way they handle emotions and the way that we as a society look at motherhood. Women also tend to be over apologetic and some feel that they lack certain leadership skills to be confident. Therefore, women tend to avoid taking up space unless they feel completely certain or are forced to show different behaviour/skills when interacting with male investors or when learning from others. We need to focus on building women's confidence through different types of leadership workshops, as well as educating men and women on hidden biases, and making it clear that female leaders do not need to act according to a male norm.
- “We need to make it clear that female leaders do not need to act according to the male norm.”***
- Shared responsibility** The involvement of different stakeholders needs to increase; schools, universities, investors, and the government as well as support programs need to be educated on inclusivity. Only if they possess the necessary knowledge, can they spread awareness, generate new opportunities and create beneficial policies.

- **Community** We should build communities in which female entrepreneurs feel safe and comfortable to speak out. These communities should involve men, investors and universities into the conversation and educate stakeholders to spread awareness around and highlight female entrepreneurship through, for example, making sure that women are always included as speakers at events. At the same time, we should promote female entrepreneurs as role models. Acknowledging differences within the community can also help to build a more inclusive environment.
- **Funding** There seems to be a bias with investors, who tend to favour male entrepreneurs. There is a need for more investors to back female entrepreneurs, and we have to involve investor networks to be more open towards a diverse range of entrepreneurs. Our final note is a quote from a Think Tank participant:

“We need to change the narrative, where we don't try to change women, but rather celebrate and acknowledge differences and give women the spotlight. We should start building awareness and empower women early on, spark diverse connections, and support women with more social capital, access to the right networks and communities”.

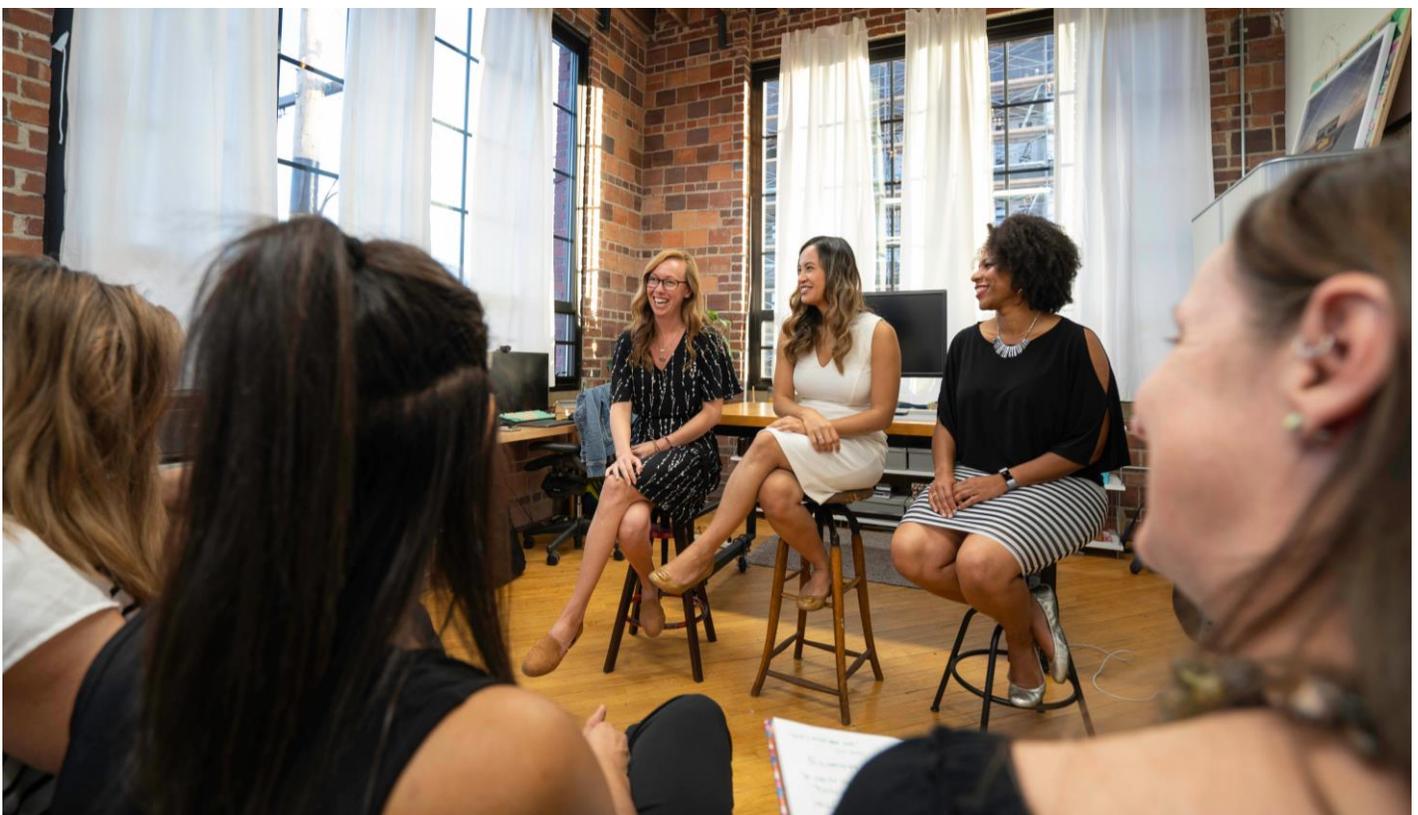


Image: Pexels, Dani Hart

Three Takeaways from an Irish Think Tank

Author: Sarah Davis (Munster Technological University)

A recent online regional event was organized by MTU's [Hincks Centre for Entrepreneurship Excellence and the Rubicon Centre](#). The event posed the following question: "For a gender inclusive ecosystem, what problems are important to address to both increase the number of women entrepreneurs and to embed existing women entrepreneurs?" Three takeaways from this online event are summarized here.

Background

The Irish entrepreneurship landscape shows a slowly improving picture for gender inclusivity, according to a 2021 [Central Statistics Office Gender Balance in Business](#) survey. Yet, there remain areas/sectors/aspects of the entrepreneurial ecosystem where gender imbalances provide serious cause for concern, such as, in some [traditional](#) and [technological](#) industrial sectors, and in investment and [business financing](#). There is little clarity or consensus on what constitutes a gender inclusive ecosystem. An inclusive ecosystem assumes that balance will be created across all aspects of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.



Image: Pinterest

ONE - Myth busting

Certain myths and inherent biases related to entrepreneurship put women off engaging. One example is the myth that all successful entrepreneurs must work on their business 24/7. This common preconception may deter women from actively exploring their business ideas or from believing that they can be an entrepreneur. Related to this myth is the belief that owning/starting or operating a business requires total devotion and attention, making it impossible to successfully pursue other goals and ambitions simultaneously. One female student encapsulated this view.

“You want to have a family, you want to have children and you need to have a balance, and if you are going to be working in one of these huge jobs, something has to give”.

Women often have, or hope to have, many roles. [The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and Economic and Social Research Institute](#) estimate that 45% of women, compared with 29% of men, are providing unpaid care in Ireland, showing that societal equality in this area still requires more attention. The focus on high-growth businesses that may require a 24/7 commitment ignores the many successful sustainable businesses, often run by women.

Questioning of the myths that surround entrepreneurship is needed to address this problem. We need to surface the myths and closely examine their relationships to an inclusive entrepreneur ecosystem. Alternatively, we can confirm our belief in unicorns.



Image: Pexels, Alexander Suhorucov

Should all businesses resemble gazelles and what would such a single species focus mean for an ecosystem?

TWO - Changing the dial

The male/female divide needs to shift (and is possibly already shifting). This requires more women in senior positions and the greater visibility of these women in the ecosystem. More examples are needed to illustrate the shift in gender balance, illustrating what is happening and what is working for women. Discussions on gender that are currently lacking, need to become more commonplace so that a more nuanced inclusive ecosystem can be negotiated and understood.

The dial won't change without the views of all genders being considered and respected. Men tend to be in the minority at gender-related events in entrepreneurship. Making men the villains of the ecosystem is not helpful for creating an inclusive ecosystem for the future. Greater visibility for men who are currently creating gender-equal businesses will show society that change is happening and that gender balance is a viable, and even preferable, working option. Case study and role model examples illustrating where and when this shift in gender is occurring are needed. We should celebrate the men and other gender identities who successfully made social/work-life-balance choices to promote common ground across genders.

Proof is needed that gender inclusion is good for everyone (men, women, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers...).

While culture is difficult to adjust, starting a conversation about it is an important beginning to finding a solution, and this conversation should respect and include diverse viewpoints. This section could well have been called gender balancing and yet that perhaps misses the point. We might never get an ecosystem with a 50/50 gender balance, and do we really need this? Complacency here could hinder progress. Let's keep changing the dial to keep the most equal ecosystem that we can achieve together.

THREE - Change the Systems and Definitions

Don't change the women! Active policy supports are needed to change the systems. Many solutions expect women to change to fit the existing systems. Existing initiatives tend to be focused on education and require women to learn what they need in order to navigate the system as it currently exists. A switch of focus is needed: a focus on the system that has preserved inequalities. As one woman stated:

“The enterprise environment, the entire ecosystem, the way things are done that was created, not out of any sense of malice but just simply because traditionally you go back years women are not involved in anything. It was completely designed by men, for men, and now we are trying to shape women so that they can work within that system, whereas I suppose ideally we should be reshaping the system to be equally inclusive of men and women.”

It is beyond time to tackle system change that works for women too. Organisations are embedding Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies into their processes and procedures, with the aim to improve inclusivity for all. Change initiatives need to zone in on the structure of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, on families where cultural biases are taught or reinforced, and on society, itself, to see improvement for women's inclusion in entrepreneurship.



Image: Pinterest

A narrow understanding of business growth as solely the potential for profitability and for employment, may not match many women's visions. The current criteria of success in business has only worked for a minority of women so far. It may well be time to (re)define existing concepts of business and definitions of success beyond business growth, and incorporate sustainability, social mission, and the creation of value (economic or other). Hiring and promotion policies should be changed so that more women can reach positions of responsibility. Structural change will take time, but it will be worth it. Redefining business with a focus on people/planet/profit and not just jobs

and narrow growth definitions, will provide more scope for women entrepreneurs to scale up.

The [WeRin](#) event organized by the [Hincks Centre](#) was attended by students of entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurs, educators, [incubator program managers](#) and enterprise support agency representatives.

The three key takeaways from this solution-focused event call for us:

1. To identify barriers in the myths of current entrepreneurship,
2. To keep a continuous eye on the gender balance dial and be open and active with opportunities to improve
3. To include concepts with a longer-term focus, such as sustainability, social mission and value creation (rather than job creation alone).

Action on these takeaways should provide better outcomes for women (men, other gender identities, and the planet).



Image: Pexels, Marcus Aurelius



Picture from 30daysreplay Germany, from Unsplash

WeRin Local Think Tank Germany: Münsterland

Author: Kim Kemper (WESt)

On the 30th of November 2021, a diverse group of 20 participants met for three hours to discuss how to better integrate female graduates into the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Münsterland region. This local Think Tank was part of the Women Entrepreneurs in Regional Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (WeRin) local Think Tank series, which saw five regional Think Tanks take place in Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Turkey and the Netherlands.

Whilst the local Think Tank of Münsterland was intended to be an on-site event, due to the intensification of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, the project team, consisting of WESt, FH Münster and ACCEU, had to make a quick decision and moved the event to an online format.

The workshop began with a warm welcome from Kim Kemper (WESt mbH), who moderated the

three-hour event. Then, the Managing Director of the Science to Business Marketing department of the FH Münster, Prof. Dr. Thorsten Kliewe, gave an introductory keynote speech on why fostering female entrepreneurship is crucial for the region. Afterwards, Junior Professor Dr. Sue Rossano-Rivero, the director of the European project, kicked off with a presentation on the research results. So far, the project has conducted over 300 interviews with participants from across the six countries participating in the project.

After the Think Tank participants gained an overview of the WeRin project and its goals, the group representing women entrepreneurs, educators, stakeholders, project managers and students from the region with different national backgrounds introduced themselves and explained why the topic was a key regional issue from their point of view.

With a significant representation of Latin Americans among the participants, we were encouraged to start with a short online dance ice breaker before starting with the interactive component led by Iulia Stroila.



Image: Unsplash, Christina @ wocintechchat.com

The first exercise encouraged participants to imagine and describe an ideal world where women feel welcomed in the entrepreneurial scene; a world where gender and other structural perspectives are taken into account. The group was then divided into smaller homogenous groups, based on participants roles or stage in entrepreneurship. Participants met in breakout rooms to develop their thoughts on the ideal world for three pre-defined levels: entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurship support programs, and entrepreneurship ecosystem. As a result, participants presented potential solutions such as incubators offering a Kita with childcare for entrepreneurial mothers and mechanisms to receive maternity protection, as employed women do.

“We have the dream that our region, Münsterland, will become a top destination in the world for female entrepreneurs.”

Through the research presented at the start of the Think Tank, the project team identified eleven major challenges within the three levels of entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurship ecosystem, and support programs.

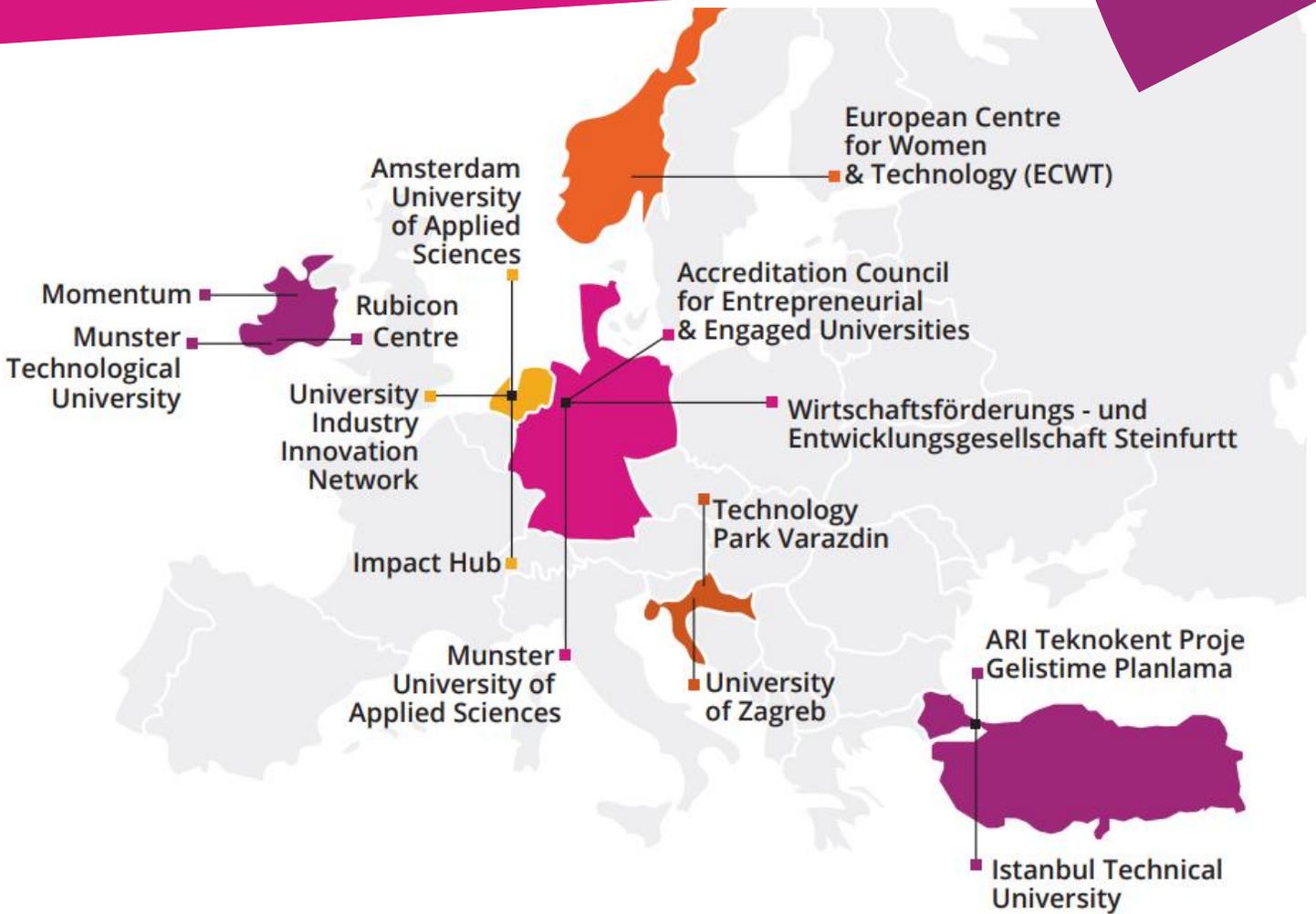
All participants voted on which challenges they identify as most important and present in their life or within their field of work. The top six challenges were then selected for the final exercise. This time, heterogeneous groups met in breakout sessions to come up with possible solutions to the challenges and discuss them. Teams came back to the plenary with innovative ideas on how they could solve the challenges previously established. Ideas included changing the evaluation criteria for allocating entrepreneurship scholarships and venture capital, as well as simple solutions like setting up a Slack channel to connect all members of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Münster.



Undoubtedly, the activities during the Think Tank and the exchange of ideas with all participants have contributed to a better understanding of the drivers and barriers for female graduate entrepreneurs in the regional ecosystem of Münsterland.

Meet the WeRin partners





Our WeRin partnership across Europe

Funded by the ERASMUS+ Knowledge Alliance programme, the Women Entrepreneurs in Regional Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems – WeRin Project unites **14 partners** from network organizations, associations, research institutes, academia and businesses based in six countries in Europe.

Their expertise and strong reputation make a solid foundation for successful achievement of the intended project results.



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ITUARI
TEKNOKENT



MTU
Olimpijski Tehnologična na Marmar
Munster Technological University



momentum
[educate + innovate]

Rubicon

TECH
PARK
— Varazdin

UIN
University Industry
Innovation Network



WEST

Munster Technological University (MTU) – proud partners of the WeRin project

At Munster Technological University (MTU), the Hincks Centre for Entrepreneurship Excellence and the Rubicon Business Incubator are proud partners in the WeRin project.

The Hincks Centre, was established in 2013 to support entrepreneurship in all its forms. Engaging in academic and policy focused research, education and training, the Centre is an integral part of the strong entrepreneurship eco-system across MTU, with a commitment to gender equality and equity in the region. The Rubicon Incubator boasts a successful beyond incubator survival rate of over 73%, with approximately 14% of women entrepreneurs, and 3% women cofounders passing through their doors into the wider ecosystem. The Incubator has assisted start-ups to raise over €83 million since its inception in 2006. WeRin team member and Rubicon Operations Manager, George Bulman, has experience with both women's entrepreneurship programmes and with mixed gender programmes, such as the flagship Enterprise Ireland New Frontiers programme.

The Hincks Centre, led by Dr Helen McGuirk, has developed many women-focused entrepreneurship programmes, including The WREN programme or Women in Rural Entrepreneurship Network. WeRin Manager and Research Fellow, Dr Niall O'Leary, with a background in Agriculture-technology, is currently active in providing the Rural Femmes programme to aspiring women entrepreneurs. Senior researcher, Dr Sarah Davis, is focused on inclusivity entrepreneurship, and her doctoral study explored older entrepreneurship education needs and benefits. Our colleague, Eilis Seoigh provides the administrative support for WeRin.

In the next phase of the project, this dynamic team is very much looking forward to leading the WeRin consortium on developing a community of practice to ensure that the project outcomes can benefit education practices and lead to a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem for women entrepreneurs.



Meet the MTU project team



Dr Sarah Davis
WeRin Project Lead
Researcher



Dr Niall O'Leary
Research Fellow and
WeRin Manager



Eilis Seoigh
WeRin Administrator



George Bulman
Rubicon Business
Incubator Operations
Manager

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences: locally embedded and nationally and internationally involved as a knowledge partner



**Amsterdam University
of Applied Sciences**

Meet the AUAS project team



Saskia Stoker (MSc)
WeRin Lead Researcher



**Prof. Dr. Ingrid
Wakkee**
WeRin Researcher



**Dr. Jeanne
Martens**
WeRin Researcher

At the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS), tomorrow's professionals are educated in a wide array of fields and disciplines of higher education. With a distinct focus on applied sciences, the AUAS enables students, lecturers, and researchers to develop cutting-edge – and practical – knowledge and innovations.

Sustainability, digitization, and diversity are some of the most pressing social issues of our time. AUAS develops new knowledge on these topics in close cooperation with organizations and companies. The university's students, lecturers, researchers, and these external partners work together on solutions for tomorrow. Furthermore, AUAS believes that all students should have the same opportunities and chances – that is Creating Tomorrow. The entrepreneurship program at AUAS puts entrepreneurship themes on the agenda for the university. The attention paid to diversity and inclusion at AUAS and within the entrepreneurship program made participation in the WeRin-project a natural fit. If we look at our student population, we see that the number of female and male students at the university is almost equal. However, within entrepreneurship education, the number of female students is lower, and additionally, their focus tends to differ from that of male students.

It is important for the WeRin project to research factors related to gender inequality, share knowledge about these topics and create awareness. The scope of the project is not limited to just education, because WeRin also gives us the opportunity to look at the broader ecosystem and how female entrepreneurs are embedded within it. The analysis that has been conducted through the project, and the regional Think Tank that took place in November, has given us great insights that we will share via the WeRin website.

[We R In \(werinproject.eu\)](http://werinproject.eu)

Faculty of Organization and Informatics, The University of Zagreb (FOI UNIZG)

The University of Zagreb (UNIZG) is the flagship educational institution of Croatia with 31 faculties, 3 art academies and various university centres and departments. UNIZG offers education programs in all scientific areas and has more than 70,000 students. The University contributes to over 50 percent of the annual research output of Croatia.

The Faculty of the Organization and Informatics (FOI), a constituent of the University of Zagreb, is a medium-sized faculty. It currently has approximately 3,000 students and 140 employees. It is a leading higher education institution which over the decades has provided education to future experts in the field of information sciences and technologies, economics, organization, communication, and other related fields. Study programs are based on contemporary models that have been applied worldwide, strongly supported by technology (e-learning).

FOI experts hold rich project and research experience within the following areas: application of information communication sciences; management of information systems; re-engineering of business processes; e-government; decision-making; e-learning; e-schools; strategic planning; risk analysis and project management; fostering of activities among underrepresented groups in ICT; Internet of Things; E-portfolios; entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship education etc.

Within the WeRin project, FOI will lead the development of the WeRin WeRLearning Approach and toolbox. FOI will lead the design of the WeRLearnIn Principles, as well as designing and developing WeRLearnIn Approach (beta version) and establishing the WeRIn Knowledge Port in collaboration with the partners. FOI will also support the dissemination and promotion of the project and its results.



Meet the FOI project team



Kristina Detelj, PhD
FOI WeRin Team Lead
Researcher



Ksenija Vuković, PhD
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Ivana Fojs, MA
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Tamara Šmaguc, PhD
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WeRin

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