



**CONNECTING
WOMEN
IN DIGITAL**

TERMS OF REFERENCE: TWG ON LEADERSHIP EMPOWERMENT

[WP3, Task 3.2]



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1. Introduction

This document outlines the framework for establishing a community of experts tasked with identifying and addressing key challenges and best practices in supporting women leadership empowerment.

The community will focus on illuminating unique obstacles women face seeking leadership roles in digital area and will highlight the best practices as well as recommendations for positive change in more global as well as local levels. The summarized insights and produced recommendations will serve as an essential resource for policy makers, industry leaders, and education stakeholders.

2. Purpose and scope of the TWG

The digital sector continues to grow as a critical driver of economic and social transformation. However, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within the digital industry. As Supernovas initiative report “Women Founders in European Deep Tech Startups”¹ indicate, just 14% of deep-tech start-up founders in Europe are women, and their ventures secure only 11.4% of the total funding in the sector. While the proportion on women in management roles is step by step getting better, the situation in Information technology sector is the lowest among all analysed sectors². Addressing this gap requires targeted interventions to empower women with the skills, opportunities, and support systems necessary to lead in the digital age.

The Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Leadership empowerment in the WIDCON project has been established to **develop expert-driven recommendations for policymakers, industry leaders, and educational institutions**. The TWG will operate within the broader Forum framework, ensuring alignment with the overarching project vision while refining its specific focus. The recommendations and guidelines will summarize the best practices across the EU and other countries and propose directions for improvement based on comprehensive regional experiences.

3. Focus area and challenge definition

The TWG will concentrate on a specific challenge – **how to eliminate or at least reduce the barriers for women in Europe to seek and gain leading roles in the digital sector**. This challenge stems from a persistent disparity between the number of women entering the digital workforce and the proportion who advance into leadership positions. While many women gain valuable experience and technical skills in the early stages of their careers, they often encounter systemic barriers, such as limited access to mentorship, sponsorship, leadership development opportunities, and organisational support, when seeking to progress into senior roles.

The TWG aims **to investigate and address the underlying causes of this leadership gap**, particularly those affecting women at the mid-career level who are at a critical juncture for advancement. This includes examining structural and cultural biases, identifying gaps in career progression pathways, and assessing the effectiveness of existing interventions. The group will explore and recommend evidence-based strategies, programs, and policies that countries and organisations can adopt to better support, retain, and promote women in digital roles into leadership positions. Therefore, the TWG will concentrate on three main guiding questions:

- What are the main barriers affecting the lower numbers of women in digital industry leadership roles?
- Who or what could change the situation by eliminating or at least reducing the limitations for women achieving leadership in the digital industry?

- How to achieve the change, indicating not only the reasons and factors behind it, but also actionable steps at different levels to achieve the positive change.

This challenge addresses the barriers preventing mid-career women in the digital industry from transitioning into leadership roles, including such **topics**, which will help to assure different aspects of the challenge are tackled and discussed:

- Barriers to women's leadership in the tech industry.
- The role of sponsorship and advocacy in career progression.
- Leadership training and executive education programs for women.
- Policy and corporate initiatives that support gender balance in leadership.
- Strategies to promote women in decision-making roles within tech organisations.
- Increasing the number of women CTOs and CEOs in emerging technology sectors.
- Addressing challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in securing investment and scaling businesses.
- Supporting female-led innovation and leadership in AI and deep-tech companies.

4. Objectives

By narrowing the focus to this challenge, the TWG aims to develop precise, evidence-based recommendations to improve leadership pathways for women in digital careers. To have a clear vision on the TWG expected results, the following objectives should be achieved:

- **Identify Organizational Challenges:** Identify and document the obstacles that women face in industry or any type of education, seeking and achieving leadership roles.
- **Analyse Socio-Cultural Influences:** Examine how socio-cultural norms and biases influence decision-making processes among women at career stages and affect their access to leadership roles.
- **Develop Actionable Recommendations:** Formulate evidence-based guidelines and policy recommendations tailored for stakeholders in education, industry, and public policy.
- **Promote Best Practices:** Identify and share best practices and success stories that can serve as models for supporting women to seek leadership positions in digital sector.
- **Foster Expert Collaboration:** Create a collaborative network of specialists who can share insights, research, and practical experiences to drive systemic change.

Note that the list of objectives can be updated by the TWG.

5. Expertise required

To ensure high-quality and informed recommendations, the TWG will consist of **12–15 members** with **diverse geographic and stakeholder representation**. Members must be part of the Forum and have relevant expertise in the TWG topic.

Preferred expertise should include:

- **Industry leaders.** Senior executives or managers from the digital and technology sectors who have experience in leadership development and gender diversity initiatives.
- **Academia & research.** Scholars and researchers specialising in gender studies, leadership development, and digital transformation.
- **Policy & advocacy.** Representatives from government agencies, think tanks, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focused on gender equity and workforce development.
- **Education & training.** Professionals are involved in designing leadership training, mentorship programs, and digital upskilling initiatives.
- **Women in digital leadership.** Women who have successfully navigated leadership pathways in the digital sector and can provide insights based on lived experience.

The TWG will prioritise geographical diversity and women's promotion (trusting in their personal experience) to ensure a balanced representation of perspectives across different EU

countries and other regions, as well as a balance between gender studies and digital area representatives to merge the theoretical and practical experience. This approach will support the development of comprehensive guidelines and best practices that reflect the full range of European experiences and challenges in promoting women's leadership in digital industries.

6. Value proposition for Members

Participating in the TWG offers a unique opportunity to shape the future of leadership in digital sector and equity across Europe. Members will collaborate with top experts to co-develop targeted, evidence-based recommendations aimed at overcoming the gender gap in digital area. By joining this TWG, the members will be able to:

- Influence European policy on gender and digital inclusion.
- Access and contribute to a high-level platform that showcases leading practices and innovations in leadership empowering.
- Engage with a dynamic community of peers who are passionate about systemic change, education transformation, and gender equity.
- Co-author strategic outputs that will be disseminated at the Women in Digital Annual Summit and beyond, boosting both visibility and impact.
- Gain early access to emerging data, best practices, and insights through collaborative research, peer exchange, and expert consultation.

Together, this TWG will not just be identifying challenges—it will be shaping solutions that will resonate across educational systems, empower girls and women, and help secure a digitally inclusive Europe.

7. Roles and management of the TWG

The TWG will be composed of three main roles. Each of them is listed below, explaining how it will be selected and what the main responsibilities are for them:

- **Secretariat:**
 - Selection guidelines: The secretariat is formed in the WIDCON project to manage the Forum as well as the TWG, a part of it.
 - Main responsibilities:
 - Facilitate the development of the TWG supporting the chair in the management.
 - Collect and provide a list of candidates for TWG participants.
 - TWG progress revision and logistics.
 - Communication and dissemination of the TWG results.
- **Chair and co-chair:**
 - Selection guidelines:
 - Each TWG in the WIDCON project has an assigned partner, who leads the TWG and serves as the chair of the TWG.

- The TWG chair selects the co-chair, who will accompany the chair.
 - The co-chair will be selected from the WIDCON partners or the Forum members, evaluating the person's expertise in the TWG topic and possibilities to contribute to the TWG management process.
- Main responsibilities:
 - Organise the meetings, schedule the meetings and provide meeting minutes.
 - Align the TWG's target scope with the overall project vision and refine it per the TWG topic.
 - Finalise the TWG network by selecting the most appropriate and valuable candidates.
 - Lead the TWG discussions and presentation of its results.
- **Experts:**
 - Selection guidelines:
 - From 12 to 15 experts will be selected for each TWG from the list of Forum members.

- The experts' selection will be made by a joint effort of the chair, co-chair and secretariat members, analysing each Forum member's profile (available online in LinkedIn, other systems or presented as a CV) and motivation (expressed in the Forum members' application form).
- The participant selection criteria will be oriented on multiple factors:
 - The person's experience in the digital and gender equality areas.
 - The person's dedication to contributing to the TWG's aim.
 - The TWG team as a whole, presenting diverse sectors (listed in Section 4).
 - The TWG team as a whole, presenting diverse geographical and/or cultural regions.
- Main responsibilities:
 - Will participate in the TWG activities, providing their insights, sharing best practices and ideas for possible improvement paths.
 - Will contribute to the summary of the discussed questions and actionable recommendations.

Participation in multiple TWGs should be controlled to guarantee diversity and concentration on specific areas of expertise. There are no hard limits yet, but chairs may

apply an assessment tool (point system) to manage oversubscription and ensure balanced representation across TWGs.

8. Experts' expected commitment and participation

To ensure the success and impact of the TWG, experts are expected to contribute actively to both the TWG's internal events and key project events. The commitment required reflects the ambition of the initiative to produce high-quality, actionable insights and recommendations for the advancement of women in digital. Therefore, each expert should be ready to dedicate approximately 5 hours per month within the 9 months, dedicated for the TWG. The TWG members are expected to:

- Participate in **regular virtual meetings** of the TWG (typically once per month).
- Share **data, insights, cases or examples** relevant to their country or field.
- Collaborate on the **drafting and peer review of key deliverables**, including interim reports and recommendations.
- Provide **constructive feedback and thought leadership** in group discussions and document reviews.
- Attend the **Annual Women in Digital Summit**, a high-level, in-person event designed to:
 - **Showcase the work of the TWG**, including findings and recommendations.
 - **Facilitate dialogue with policymakers, stakeholder representatives.**

- **Build visibility and credibility** for the project and its participants at the European level.

The experts of the TWG will expand their professional network and contribute meaningfully to advancing gender equity in the digital space. As recognition for their contributions, the WIDCON project will ensure expert visibility on its website and social media platforms, highlighting their input and reinforcing their role in shaping the discourse on women's digital inclusion.

9. Initial work plan

The TWG will adopt a flexible and dynamic approach to achieve its objectives. Meeting frequency will be fixed to **monthly virtual meetings** and additional working sessions if needed.

TWG should apply **different formats** for experience sharing and discussion (at least 2 from the list below) to support the triangulation in the issue-solving and recommendation summarisation process:

- Expert roundtables.
- Stakeholder, experts' interviews.
- Thematic workshops.
- Online collaborative discussions and document reviews.

In the first TWG meeting, a roundtable discussion will be organised to divide the main challenge of women's leadership empowerment into micro-ones, areas of barriers, and its more detailed specifications. Close to it online tool for collaborative Fish Bone diagram building to structure the expressed micro challenges will be used. This will combine more creative and more structured approaches in highlighting the existing challenges and laying the path to further discussion on who is affecting it and what actions could be taken to change it.

Further meetings will follow the format, where a quick recap of the previous meeting results will be done, with a possibility to raise some new questions or insights generated after the meeting. Further, the meeting will concentrate on a new discussion topic, using different formats, depending on the discussed question (interviews and reviews to estimate the main barriers and extract the best practices, roundtable discussions and workshops to generate new ideas, etc).

The discussions will be summarised, providing concentrated key points and actionable recommendations. Considering some questions or ideas might be too specific or not widely accepted, each decision or report should be consensus-driven. If the decision is not supported by at least 2/3 of the WTG members, an additional discussion session should be used to express the arguments for and against. After this session, the majority opinion is used to make the decision. This should lead to a more unified vision and final recommendations validated by the full TWG.

The TWG will operate for a period of up to **9 months**, ensuring sufficient time for research, analysis, stakeholder consultation, and the development of actionable recommendations. The recommended start date is September 2025.

To guide activities while allowing flexibility, the TWG will follow this initial work plan:

Phase 0: Preparation of the TWG

- Approve the ToR by the Secretariat (May 2025)
- Launch of the TWG (June 2025)

- Launch of Call for interest (June 2025)
- Deadline for applications (July 2025)
- Experts' selection and introduction to the communication system, a platform used for communication (July 2025)

Phase 1: Initiation (*Month 1*)

- Kick-off Meeting: Initial virtual meeting to introduce experts, clarify objectives, and establish ground rules.
- Expert Mapping: Review and confirm the expertise areas of participants; identify any gaps that may require additional consultation.

Phase 2: Problem analysis & research (*Months 2-3*)

- Structuring of the problem, by building the taxonomy for the main leadership barriers for mid-career women in digital roles.
- Discussions, expert interviews and stakeholder consultations.

Phase 3: Development of recommendations (*Months 4-7*)

- Identification of successful case studies and regional best practices.
- Identification of key intervention areas.
- Drafting of targeted policy, industry, and education-based solutions.

Phase 4: Finalisation (Months 8-9)

- Refinement and finalisation of recommendations.
- Preparation and dissemination of the final report.
- Presentation of Best practices and results at the WID Annual Summit

10.Expected outcomes

The TWG should produce the following key deliverables:

- **Policy brief.** Summarising key barriers, best practices, and expert recommendations and providing actionable insights for policymakers, with a focus on improving gender and leadership representation in digital industries across different EU regions.
- **Organization briefing toolkit.** Providing presentations decks, executive summaries and briefing notes for dissemination among organizations to support leadership empowerment initiatives inside of the organizations.
- **Educational framework.** A guide for integrating leadership development into digital skills training programs, emphasising tailored approaches based on EU-wide best practices.
- **Best Practices Repository.** Case studies, success stories, and best practices that can serve as models for other regions or institutions.

The TWG will provide periodic updates to relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, industry partners, and educational institutions. The initial findings will be presented at the Women in Digital (WiD) Annual Summit and other events, while the final report and associated materials will be disseminated through policy forums, industry events, and academic publications, ensuring broad accessibility across different EU regions. While fragments of the TWG meeting records, as members' testimonials or recommendations, will be shared within the general society.

11. Review and adjustments

A mid-term review may be conducted to assess progress and make necessary adjustments to ensure alignment with objectives and expected outcomes. The TWG's work plan may be adapted as needed to accommodate emerging insights or stakeholder feedback.

The review may be done by the WIDCON Secretariat, in collaboration with the Governing Board, evaluating the progress and achieved results in month 5. For this period the phase 1 should be finished, and a structured summary of the main leadership barriers for mid-career women in digital roles should be provided. As well, the initial version of at least one outcome should be provided.

12. Conclusion

By bringing together a group of experts dedicated to addressing leadership challenges for women in the digital sector, the TWG aims to drive meaningful change through targeted, actionable recommendations. The insights generated will summarise the best EU experiences and serve as a foundation for sustainable policy and industry interventions that enhance leadership opportunities for women in the digital economy.