



The  
Federal Government

# The Action Plan “More women entrepreneurs for our SMEs” – overview

*(Current as at 15 June 2023)*

**MORE WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS**

**FOR OUR SMEs**



## The Action Plan “More women entrepreneurs for our SMEs” – overview<sup>1</sup>

Women entrepreneurs are indispensable for a vibrant and successful German SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) sector. More self-employed women in Germany’s “Mittelstand” – SMEs, the skilled craft sector, and traditional and innovative new startups – could generate additional growth and make a significant contribution towards the green and digital transitions.

In the joint Action Plan “More women entrepreneurs for our SMEs”, the participating stakeholders aim

- to highlight the achievements of women in SMEs, skilled crafts and startups,
- to motivate more women to go into business,
- to establish a joint platform for a large number of existing and new measures and activities in various fields, and
- to enhance the visibility and impact of the individual measures,

in order to bring about positive changes for the career and personal prospects of women and to boost the performance, competitiveness and future viability of our SME sector.

The Action Plan is also an incentive and appeal to the relevant federal ministries, companies, associations, networks, scientists and the self-employed women themselves to breathe life into the measures cited here, to use and develop them, and to add their own activities.

This is because joint action by many parties is needed if more women are to build up their own business, found an innovative startup, take over a company, embark on an occupation in the skilled craft or STEM sector, or reach the top levels of companies, associations, institutions and investment committees.

The Action Plan “More women entrepreneurs for our SMEs” pursues an ambitious approach: for the first time, the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) has launched an interministerial initiative focusing specifically on the interests of self-employed women and the compatibility of self-employment and family life – something that really affects self-employed mothers and fathers equally. Many of the 40+ measures address the personal situations of women, e.g. the higher burden of care provision or the smaller amounts of finance for startup teams which include women. But the Action Plan also contains measures for men, e.g. grants towards child care services from EXIST funding programmes, or measures in the venture capital field.

<sup>1</sup> You can find the full text of the Action Plan (in German) at [www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Dossier/mehr-unternehmerinnen-fuer-den-mittelstand.html](http://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/DE/Dossier/mehr-unternehmerinnen-fuer-den-mittelstand.html).

Another new feature is the packaging together of measures from 32 very different players – federal ministries, associations, networks and academic institutions. They all commit to assisting self-employed women and are placing their measures on the platform in order to provide an example to others and to generate a greater impact in combination with the other activities. Many measures are triggered when people talk with one another and different stakeholders come together. They are implemented by the stakeholders on their own responsibility or jointly.

The Action Plan forms the starting point for the ongoing work process. There are points where the flow of information has been improved, but there is still a lack of studies and data to back up demands and interests. To this end, we want to maintain a constructive dialogue with federal ministries and associations. Also, new connections need to be built up, e.g. to the organisations of self-employed female migrants, and issues need to be discussed outside their usual context, e.g. having the Economic Affairs Ministry reflect on the protection afforded to working mothers. The traditional communication patterns are to be changed, e.g. via input from the Federal Association of Liberal Professions (BFB) to promote the visibility of women in the media. And coalitions are to be built, e.g. by having companies headed by women certified by the German Association of Women Entrepreneurs (VdU), which can open up access for companies managed by women to supply chains of multinational enterprises. The organisations of the skilled craft sector are to be given systematic access to the STEM clusters, in order to promote occupations in the skilled craft sector across Germany.

## Facts and figures

More than 99% of Germany's companies are SMEs – and the sector is correspondingly diverse: it ranges from modern industrial companies, including many highly specialised world market leaders (Germany's hidden champions), to small and large family-run firms, and innovative startups, skilled craft firms, own-account workers and service companies, e.g. in the field of retailing and professional services. Women are already helping to make the SME sector strong: they are bosses and managers, entrepreneurs and investors, consultants and master craftspeople, "on board" wives of entrepreneurs; they do honorary work in guilds and chambers, and are active in social enterprises.

**One in five SMEs already has a female boss**, meaning that 757,000 SMEs in Germany were run by women in 2022. These leaders guide the company through the market, take strategic investment decisions and plan the future of their companies and employees. In total, 1.2 million women are self-employed in Germany. 40% of them (480,000) do not work on their own: they have a total of 3.3 million employees and around 100,000 trainees. One quarter of the self-employed women (293,000) have a migrant background.

## *Why is it important for more women to be able to develop their potential as self-employed persons in the economy?*

**Wanted – the next generation:** At present, many businesspeople are faced with the task of finding a successor to take over their businesses. In areas like professional services, in which a very large number of self-employed women can be found, it is sure that many women will take over the businesses: women account for 54% of startups in this sector (by way of comparison: the average percentage of startups across the economy founded by women was 42% in 2021). But greater efforts are needed in the skilled craft sector, where 125,000 companies will need to find a new generation of management in the years up to 2030: in this part of the economy, only around 23% of companies are run by women. If the healthy companies are to maintain their commercial performance, we need more women to take them over.

**Mixed teams enjoy commercial success:** Women bring fresh ideas and perspectives into business. And this pays off: international studies show that companies with mixed management and staff teams at all levels are more innovative and successful than companies run only by men.

**Women are important for climate action:** Women bring momentum to the climate and energy transition. According to a report by the European Investment Bank, companies run by women tend to do better in terms of the environment, social performance and governance than other firms. When it comes to introducing environmentally friendly processes, companies with more women in executive positions tend to be more successful. And companies with mixed teams at top managerial level tend to perform better in social, ecological and sustainability terms.

**Women tend to set up green and social enterprises:** More than 40% of innovative new businesses in Germany today are founded as social enterprises, and the figure is increasing. The proportion of these enterprises being founded by women is – at up to 50% according to some studies – much higher than the proportion of all innovative startups in Germany (18%). These companies focus less on profit maximisation and more on using their innovative entrepreneurship to make a specific contribution to environmental protection or the solution of a societal issue.

## The measures

### Goal A: Financial services for women entrepreneurs and improved access to venture capital for women

The Federal Government supports SMEs and members of the professions, potential entrepreneurs and innovative startups so that they can implement new projects, products, processes and services. In particular, a number of gender-neutral **promotional instruments** to fund startups and growing companies have been set up. These funding programmes can be supplemented by specific **coaching and mentoring** for self-employed women (see the measures under Goal B). The EXIST Business Startup Grant and the EXIST Transfer of Research programme are setting **new standards by addressing the personal situations of women (and men) in terms of the compatibility of self-employment and family life**. This example could be taken up by other funding programmes.

The funding instruments aim to support all the phases of starting out in business – from spin-offs from higher education and research establishments through to support for expansion and growth in young companies already on the market. However, there is to some extent a lack of financial services for certain **issues or types of companies (e.g. non-commercial companies) which tend to be of more interest to businesswomen**. The services available here are being supplemented by **new services from the state** (see Measure 2.2).

A key factor behind the success of startups and young technology firms is good access to **venture capital**. But it tends to be difficult in Germany for innovative startups to obtain financing during the capital-intensive growth phase in particular. The Federal Government is therefore deploying a raft of tailored instruments to make venture capital available from public funding and is providing **incentives for more women to join funds. It is thus also mobilising private-sector investment for innovative startup teams run by women and for mixed teams on the German venture capital market** (see Measure 1.2). We hope that this will also result in more decisions in favour of investment in companies and innovative startups headed by women. The same goes for the increased appointment of women to leading positions in state-run and state-funded venture capital funds and their investment committees, and the provision of grants to boost the number of upcoming female managers (see Measure 1.3).

#### **An overview of the measures under Goal A:**

##### **Subgoal 1: Measures to improve the conditions for access to venture capital for women**

- 1.1 More women in the management and supervision of state-run and funded venture capital funds and in the investment committees of state-run and funded funds and venture capital companies (BMWK)
- 1.2 More venture capital for women: Emerging Manager Facility to support small funds with women in their management (BMWK)
- 1.3 Grants for female investment managers: “KfW Capital Fellowships Women in VC” (BMWK)

##### **Subgoal 2: Measures to fund startups**

- 2.1 Adapting the conditions in funding programmes to the personal situations of women: EXIST Business Startup Grant and EXIST Transfer of Research (BMWK)
- 2.2 Programmes for social enterprises (BMWK)

#### **Goal B: More startups by and with women**

It is still the case that women who go into business are in a minority compared with their male counterparts. However, recent years have seen an increasing proportion of new businesses being founded by women: of the 607,000 new companies in 2021, 257,000 were set up by women. So the proportion of women entrepreneurs stood at 42% – four percentage points higher than in 2020 (38%) and six points higher than in 2019 (36%). This positive development is to be bolstered by a range of measures helping even more women to go into business.

A special focus is also being placed on the **handover of companies to the next generation**: in the period to the end of 2026, around 560,000 of the 3.8 million SMEs in Germany will be looking to find someone to take over the businesses. The shortage of suitable people to take over these businesses continues to be the biggest problem. Only 8% of all entrepreneurs in Germany take over an existing company. There is great potential here for women interested in going into business.

Around 32% of self-employed women are aged between 20 and 44. The equivalent figure for women with a migrant background is even higher, at around 45%. 60,000 self-employed women and 152,000 self-employed men have at least one child aged under three in their household. The compatibility of self-employment and family life is important for all of them. They do not make up a large proportion of the total self-employed persons, but the number of young women entrepreneurs is increasing, and with it the number of those who find that their new business is starting to grow at the same time as their new family.

The measures under subgoal 2 (**Measures to motivate women interested in startups and to support women starting up in business**) are targeted at the specific needs of women interested in starting a business (see Measures 2.2 and 2.3) and at certain target groups like female scientists (NEW: EXIST-Women – coaching and mentoring services not least for women (see Measure 2.1), skilled craftswomen (see Measure 2.5) and women with a migrant background (see Measure 2.6).

Better child care services would particularly encourage more women with small children to go into business. The improvement of **child day care services** is therefore of particular importance (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, BMFSFJ, see Measure 1.1). The calls by business associations to introduce improved possibilities for **protection of self-employed mothers** are not easy to realise. Thanks to the initiative taken by the Economic Affairs Ministry, all the stakeholders (incl. business associations and perhaps other ministries) can come together, share facts about the present situation, and develop ideas (see Measure 1.2.2). Improvements to the parental allowance are to be implemented via a legislative reform (see Measure 1.2.3).

### **An overview of the measures under Goal B:**

#### **Subgoal 1: Measures to improve compatibility of work and family life and to provide welfare and financial security**

- 1.1 Further development of child day care services (BMFSFJ)
  - 1.2.2 Collecting ideas on the possible introduction of protection for self-employed mothers (BMFSFJ)
  - 1.2.3 Improvements in the parental allowance rules (BMFSFJ)

#### **Subgoal 2: Measures to motivate women interested in startups and to support women starting up in business**

- 2.1 New funding line “EXIST-Women” (BMWK)
- 2.2 “CoCo – Female Founders” initiative of KfW Foundation and Social Business Women
- 2.3 BMWK/KfW startup platform: “Strong women entrepreneurs” website and services for women entrepreneurs

- 2.5 New startups and company handovers: services for skilled craftswomen
- 2.6 “STAGE – for international FEMpreneurs” project: platform and networking of women entrepreneurs with a migrant background (in planning)

### Goal C: Making self-employed women and their achievements more visible

What do self-employed women do? What sectors do they work in? Do they have a migrant background? What makes women entrepreneurs successful? What policy environment do they need to be successful? Such questions are difficult to answer because most of the statistics and funding programmes are designed in a gender-neutral way and provide information about “the company” or “the earner” with no indications of the personal situations of the people involved. Cooperation between the ministries, networks and associations makes it possible to **collate and communicate information about personal situations and the business environment**.

Particular mention should be made of the “**WOMEN Entrepreneurs**” initiative of the Economic Affairs Ministry, which has just been extended. “Real-life” women entrepreneurs visit schools and higher education institutions to spread the message about self-employment. The **role model women entrepreneurs** tell girls and young women (and young men) about their challenges, experience and successes. In the context of the Action Plan, various role model campaigns share experience and will try to pool their efforts on certain days like Girls’ Day in order to boost their impact.

#### An overview of the measures under Goal C:

##### **Subgoal 2: Measures to give women a voice, appreciate their achievements and make them visible**

2.6 Visibility of self-employed women in the media

##### **Subgoal 3: Measures to strengthen networks and role models**

3.1 Promoting role models – the Economic Affairs Ministry’s “WOMEN Entrepreneurs” initiative

### Goal D: New career prospects for girls and women entrepreneurs in the skilled craft sector and STEM occupations

Women and girls are still clearly underrepresented in many occupations in the skilled crafts and STEM sectors. Traditional gender stereotypes still impede many women from gaining a foothold in these areas. At the same time, the skilled craft sector is gaining in importance. With its approximately one million companies and almost 5.6 million employees, it is playing a key role in the transition to more climate action and sustainability. This is because the skilled craftworkers are needed to install heat pumps and roof-top solar panels, or to make buildings energy-efficient. And the fields of technology, computer science and digital applications which dominate the STEM occupations are also playing an increasingly important role in our day-to-day lives.

Both the skilled craft sector and the STEM occupations have a lot to gain from paying greater attention to women's interests and prospects and by casting off stereotypes. One of the key tasks for the future will therefore be to interest more women and girls in these occupations and to promote the entry and acceptance of female employees and managers in these areas.

Since June 2022, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has been generating fresh impetus via the **STEM Action Plan 2.0** for STEM education, e.g. with the STEM Networking Office and its community platform, as well as with the STEM clusters. The Research Ministry is also engaging via these measures with the "More women entrepreneurs for our SMEs" Action Plan.

There are very limited possibilities for study and careers advisors to network and share expertise on skilled craft and STEM occupations. The STEM Networking Office funded by the Research Ministry aims to remedy this: it has for example set up a community platform on which it is possible to talk and network online throughout Germany. But it is not yet sufficiently known. The Action Plan aims to encourage more stakeholders from the skilled craft sector to register on the platform.

Joint efforts by the Research Ministry, the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts and the Economic Affairs Ministry to attract more skilled craft businesses and chambers into the Research Ministry's well-established and very successful STEM Cluster funding measure aim to whet the appetite of even more young people for occupations in the skilled craft sector. Since the **current STEM Cluster funding guideline is mainly addressed to girls**, Measure 1.2 is a good fit for the Action Plan. The Economic Affairs Ministry will make use of the **dialogue on the future of the skilled craft sector** to work with the Confederation of Skilled Crafts and the Trade Union Confederation to improve the policy environment for self-employment and employment of women in the skilled craft sector and to foster a cultural shift towards more equal opportunities in the sector. A dialogue with the sector is also to address the question of how support can be given towards honorary work by women.

#### **An overview of the measures under Goal D:**

##### **Subgoal 1: Measures to attract girls and women into skilled craft and STEM occupations**

1.2 STEM clusters

1.5 The dialogue on the future of the skilled craft sector



## An overview of the individual measures

### A. Financial services for women entrepreneurs and improved access to venture capital for women

1. Measures to improve the conditions for access to venture capital for women
  - 1.1 More women in the management and supervision of state-run and funded venture capital funds and in the investment committees of state-run and funded funds and venture capital companies (BMWK)
  - 1.2 More venture capital for women: Emerging Manager Facility (BMWK)
  - 1.3 Grants for female investment managers: “KfW Capital Fellowships Women in VC” (BMWK)
  - 1.4 Information and discussion events on “improved access to venture capital for women” (BMWK)
2. Measures to fund startups
  - 2.1 Adapting the conditions in funding programmes to the personal situations of women: EXIST Business Startup Grant and EXIST Transfer of Research (BMWK)
  - 2.2 Programmes for social enterprises
    - 2.2.1 “REACT with impact” funding programme (BMWK)
    - 2.2.2 Ways to finance companies not aiming to list themselves or attract takeovers (BMWK)
  - 2.3 More transparency for specific funding services for women entrepreneurs: funding database (BMWK)

### B. More startups by and with women

1. Measures to improve compatibility of work and family life and to provide welfare and financial security
  - 1.1 Further development of child day care services
    - 1.1.1 Improving the quality of and participation in child day care (BMFSFJ)
    - 1.1.2 Expansion of child day care and all-day care for children of primary school age (BMFSFJ)
    - 1.1.3 Overall strategy “Securing skilled labour in child day care facilities and all-day care facilities at primary schools” (BMFSFJ)
  - 1.2 Support during pregnancy, birth and parental leave
    - 1.2.1 More information about ways to provide for the period of protection of working mothers (BMG, BMFSFJ, BMWK)
    - 1.2.2 Collecting ideas on the possible introduction of protection for self-employed mothers (BMFSFJ)
    - 1.2.3 Improvements in the parental allowance rules (BMFSFJ)

2. Measures to motivate women interested in startups and to support women starting up in business
  - 2.1 New funding line “EXIST-Women” (BMWK)
  - 2.2 “CoCo – Female Founders” initiative of KfW Foundation and Social Business Women
  - 2.3 BMWK/KfW startup platform: “Strong women entrepreneurs” website and services for women entrepreneurs (BMWK, KfW)
  - 2.4 “Women entrepreneurs promote the green economy” (BMFSFJ)
  - 2.5 New startups and company handovers: services for skilled craftswomen (chambers of skilled crafts, e.g. in Hamburg and Karlsruhe)
  - 2.6 “STAGE – for international FEMpreneurs” project: platform and networking of women entrepreneurs with a migrant background (in planning)
  
3. Measures to improve the flow of information
  - 3.1 Better visibility of information services and targeted information for women interested in going into business, and synergies between websites (BMWK, BMFSFJ, BMG)
  - 3.2 Information events (see list of events)

## C. Making self-employed women and their achievements more visible

1. Communication-related measures
  - 1.1 Improve the data available to describe the current situation (BMWK)
  - 1.2. Information and discussion events and workshops (see list of events)
  
2. Measures to give women a voice, appreciate their achievements, and make them visible
  - 2.1 Support for female candidates for advisory and supervisory boards (VdU)
  - 2.2 “Innovative Women in the Spotlight” funding guideline (BMBF)
  - 2.3 Dialogue on communication-related measures (BMWK)
  - 2.4 “Together against Sexism” alliance (BMFSFJ)
  - 2.5 “WeConnect International” certification of companies headed by women (VdU)
  - 2.6 Visibility of self-employed women in the media (BFB)
  
3. Measures to strengthen networks and role models
  - 3.1 Promoting role models – the Economic Affairs Ministry’s “WOMEN Entrepreneurs” initiative (BMWK)
  - 3.2 Role models: Dialogue, agreement on common issues, campaigns and alliances, e.g. “Role Model Day” (BMWK, WOMEN Entrepreneurs Coordinating Office)
  - 3.3 More women in executive positions (FidAR)
  - 3.4 More transparency for existing networks: network database and map of initiatives (bga, #SheTransformsIT)
  - 3.5 Networks: dialogue, agreement on common issues, campaigns and alliances (BMWK)
  - 3.6 Letter of intent on the promotion of women in business (in planning) (Startup Association, #SheTransformsIT)

## D. New career prospects for girls and female entrepreneurs in the skilled craft sector and STEM occupations

### 1. Measures to attract girls and women into skilled craft and STEM occupations

- 1.1 Cooperation with the STEM community platform (BMBF)
- 1.2 STEM clusters (BMBF)
- 1.3 STEM campaign (#MINTmagie) (BMBF)
- 1.4 Stereotype-free, neutral careers advice (BMBF, BMFSFJ, IW JUNOR gGmbH)
- 1.5 Dialogue on the future of the skilled craft sector (BMWK)
- 1.6 Promoting awareness of successful measures (BMWK)
- 1.7 EU-ESTEAM Fest for girls (EU COM)

In cooperation with



## List of stakeholders (current as at 15 June 2023)

The following federal ministries, financing institutions, associations, networks, academic and other institutes are taking part in the Action Plan with their own activities:

### Federal ministries

1. Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)
2. Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ)
3. Federal Ministry of Health (BMG)
4. Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK)
5. Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration (IntB)

### State and European financing institutions

6. European Investment Fund (EIF)
7. Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW)
8. KfW Capital

### Trade associations and networks

9. Bundesverband der Freien Berufe (Federal Association of Liberal Professions) (BFB)
10. Bundesverband Deutsche Startups (Startup-Verband – German Startups Association)
11. Bundesverband Deutscher Kapitalbeteiligungsgesellschaften (German Private Equity and Venture Capital Association) (BVK)
12. bundesweite gründerinnenagentur, bga (National Agency for Women Start-up Activities and Services)
13. Deutsche Industrie- und Handelskammer (DIHK – Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry)
14. Frauen in die Aufsichtsräte (Women on Supervisory Boards) (FidAR)
15. Frauenalia gUG
16. “FRAUEN unternehmen” (WOMEN Entrepreneurs) Coordinating Office – BMWK
17. Hamburg chamber of skilled crafts
18. Karlsruhe chamber of skilled crafts
19. High-tech Start-up Fund (HTGF)
20. Initiative Selbständiger Immigrantinnen (I.S.I. – Initiative for Self-employed Female Immigrants)
21. jumpp – Your springboard to self-employment, Female-Lead Businesses
22. Kompetenzzentrum Technik-Diversity-Chancengleichheit (kompetenzz – Technology-Diversity-Equality Centre of Excellence)
23. Project Management Jülich/Research Centre Jülich (EXIST) – BMWK
24. SIE gründet – Verband internationaler Entrepreneurinnen in Deutschland (Association of International Women Entrepreneurs in Germany)
25. Social Business Women
26. Verband deutscher Unternehmerinnen (VdU – German Association of Women Entrepreneurs)
27. Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks (ZDH – German Confederation of Skilled Crafts)
28. #SheTransformsIT

**Academic institutes**

29. Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln JUNIOR (IW JUNIOR – German Economic Institute JUNIOR)
30. Institute for SME Research, Bonn (IfM)
31. RWK Centre of Excellence

**Others**

32. KfW Foundation

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