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# *Map Export Dynamics, Challenges & Opportunities for female-run businesses. A transnational needs assessment*

## **Country Snapshot Italy**

**Jointly developed by IDP European Consultants and IAL Innovazione  
Apprendimento Lavoro Friuli Venezia Giulia SRL**

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## Introduction

According to Unioncamere data, in 2020 the female employment rate stood at 52.1%, almost twenty points less than the male one (71.8%). In addition to being the second lowest in the European Union (behind Greece), from 2019 to 2021 it has also further reduced more markedly than the male one: -2% and -1.5%<sup>1</sup>.

The findings of this country report show that the internationalisation of Italian SMEs represents a growing phenomenon. The evidence is given by the CERVED Report, highlighting that Italian SMEs exporting abroad were at least 60% in 2018 (CERVED, 2018). In this overview, it is possible to consider the impact of COVID-19 as an extra topic, as it has been affecting SMEs access to markets abroad. The pandemic forced at least 390.000 SMEs to quit their businesses in Italy<sup>2</sup> (Confcommercio, 2022).

For the above-mentioned reason, the Italian government decided to pass national recovery plans to give financial support to small enterprises. In this case, there is the so-called *Fund for Women's Business*. This financial help will serve to implement and accelerate green and digital transition, economic and social resilience within the country<sup>3</sup>.

Concerning investments to boost the potential of Italian women-led SMEs, it is important to consider restrictions in global trade caused by Covid-19. For this reason, it is worth to mention the Recovery and Resilience Facility, also known as RRF. It is a temporary economic support Plan, developed by the European Commission to let Member States in Europe restore their economies through investments (European Commission, 2021).

RRF actions will help them to develop their action models in internationalisation and constructing building capacity. In this sense, it is evident that RRF helps especially female SMEs foster their competitiveness. Now, the question relies on the knowledge that women entrepreneurs can have about exports competitiveness. It is important to say that training curricula in Italy are available, both face to face and in digital format. Women entrepreneurs can choose to attend standard training courses about useful topic in entrepreneurship, such as financial literacy, risk management methodology (SACE website)<sup>4</sup>.

In this view, it is also included the fact that, in Italy, the sector in which women are most involved is in the Fashion one. Concerning Food and Handicraft sectors, the findings do not show any precise statistic about their involvement in SMEs. This report will highlight not only specific statistics related to the impact of female competitiveness into the national territory; it will also show the current situation of available operational tools in Italy which enable especially female SMEs boosting their exports abroad. For this purpose, a key role is integrated by the Italian SACE.

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<sup>1</sup>PMI, it, *Donne d'impresa in Italia, fra primati e criticità*, 2022. Website: <https://www.pmi.it/economia/lavoro/380136/donne-dimpresa-in-italia-fra-primati-e-criticita.html?msclkid=39631fb3c19111ecb37791b2f87e07a6#occupazione-femminil>.

<sup>2</sup>CONFCOMMERCIO, *Imprese per l'Italia, CONFCOMMERCIO: nel 2020 oltre 300mila imprese in meno, l'80% a causa del covid*, CONFCOMMERCIO, 2022. Website: <https://www.confcommercio.it/-/comunicato-203-2020-300mila-imprese-in-meno-causa-covid>.

<sup>3</sup>European Commission, *Italy's recovery and resilience plan*, 2021. Website: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en).

<sup>4</sup>SACE, *Training course on risk management methodology*, 2022. Website: <https://www.sace.it/en/solutions/category-detail/training-advisory-services>. Last access April 5, 2022.

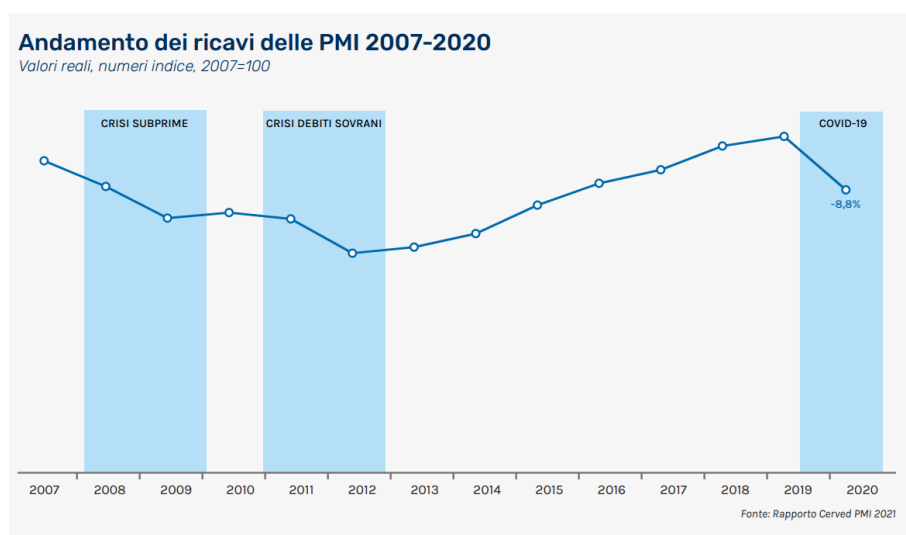
## Quantitative indicators on the phenomenon of internationalisation of EU female-led SMEs

### Historic evolution of internationalisation in Italy

Nowadays, there are about 159.925 SMEs. Among them, 132.959 are small enterprises employing 2.4 million of people. On the other side, 26.966 are medium ones and they employ 2.1 people in Italy. In this sense, SMEs represent the core engine of the Italian economy. In fact, they registered a turnover up to 1.054 € in 2019, before the pandemic<sup>5</sup>.

In 2020, the spreading of Covid-19 caused severe effects on Italian SMEs. According to ConfCommercio source, at least 390.000 SMEs had to quit their businesses in Italy<sup>6</sup>. In terms of features, this number represents the 33% of Italian SMEs that had to abandon the national markets<sup>7</sup>.

These data show the negative impacts that Covid-19 has had on Italian enterprises. According to CERVED report (2021), 33% of SMEs registered important income waste by the end of 2020. In fact, statistics show that between 2019 and 2020 SMEs lost -8.8% of their income due to trade lockdown and restrictions<sup>8</sup>.



Source: Rapporto CERVED PMI 2021, p. 8.

Nowadays, the internationalisation of Italian SMEs represents a very important issue. In 2018, Italian SMEs exporting abroad were at least 60%. Even though the graphic below shows a minimum increase of export in 2018 (+5%), data confirm that Italy is undoubtedly a growing economy preparing for internationalisation<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>CERVED, *Rapporto CERVED PMI 2021*, p. 8, CERVED 2021. Website: [ESECUTIVO\\_WEB-RAP-CERVED-PMI-2021.pdf](#).

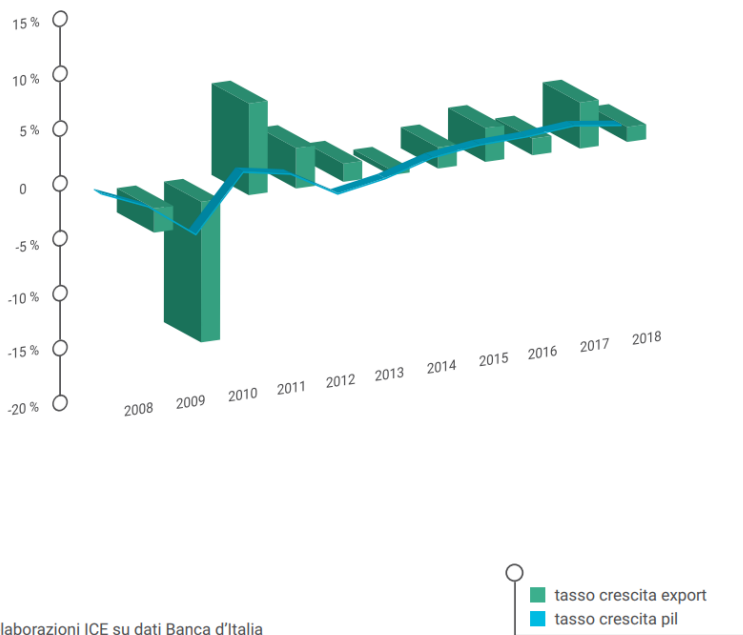
<sup>6</sup>CONFCOMMERCIO, *Imprese per l'Italia, CONFCOMMERCIO: nel 2020 oltre 300mila imprese in meno, l'80% a causa del covid*, CONFCOMMERCIO, 2022. Website: <https://www.confcommercio.it/-/comunicato-203-2020-300mila-imprese-in-meno-causa-covid>.

<sup>7</sup>CERVED, *Rapporto CERVED PMI 2021*, p. 8, CERVED 2021. Website: [ESECUTIVO\\_WEB-RAP-CERVED-PMI-2021.pdf](#).

<sup>8</sup>CERVED, *Rapporto CERVED PMI 2021*, p. 8, CERVED 2021. Website: [ESECUTIVO\\_WEB-RAP-CERVED-PMI-2021.pdf](#).

<sup>9</sup>Italian Trade & Investment Agency (ITA), *Rapporto ICE 2018-2019. L'Italia nell'economia internazionale*, p. 6 HIGHLIGHTS, 2019. Website: [https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/Booklet%20Rapporto%20ICE%202018-2019\\_0.pdf](https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/Booklet%20Rapporto%20ICE%202018-2019_0.pdf).

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Fonte: elaborazioni ICE su dati Banca d'Italia

Source: Banca d'Italia

The major contrast is represented by the pandemic, concerning 2020 – 2021. In fact, trade restrictions caused to SMEs the non-choice of dealing with international markets. This is due to major difficulties that Italian SMEs encounter in promoting their businesses abroad, mainly in lockdown span of time. ITA confirmed that 33% of Italian SMEs registered an important decrease in their incomes, at the end of 2020.

The Italian government passed economic Plans to help large companies and SMEs restore their competitiveness. With a particular focus on Italian female-led SMEs, the government approved new policies to boost their confidence, guaranteeing special business funds and loans. For instance, the so-called “Fondo d’Impresa Femminile” – in English: “Fund for Women’s Business” – helps female enterprises afford financial categories, such as:

- renovation of locations and headquarters.
- Purchasing special software, digital platform, computer programs and technological solutions.
- Financial facilities to sustain women-led businesses, set up by no more than 36 months<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup>MISE. *SPESE AMMISSIBILI. INDICAZIONI E CONDIZIONI DI AMMISSIBILITÀ*, p. 1, MISE 2021. Website: [https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/normativa/Allegato\\_n\\_2\\_-\\_Spese\\_ammissibili\\_DD2022FID.pdf](https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/normativa/Allegato_n_2_-_Spese_ammissibili_DD2022FID.pdf).

### Spatial distribution of SMEs in Italy

Nowadays, regions in Italy are trying to restore their competitiveness that decreased because of lockdown and trade stop during the pandemic. More specifically, most of the regions in Centre-South Italy have been facing severe difficulties in restoring the economy. The mentioned regions are Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia, Sicily, Abruzzo, Molise, and Sardinia<sup>11</sup>.

For this reason, the government passed a national four-year programme, known as “Southern Export Plan”. It has started in 2018, aiming at providing financial loans to those regions in Italy in the need of boost their potential. The total financial budget is composed of € 50 million, providing financial loans for training and promotion actions. It is necessary to clarify that this economic Plan is addressed to SMEs located in those less developed regions – known as Convergence regions (Puglia, Campania, Sicily, Calabria) - having a GDP per capita of less than 75% of the EU average<sup>12</sup>.

In detail, the Plan makes use of an allocation of EUR 56.5 million, distributed between the so-called “less developed” regions in Italy: Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia, and Sicily, and those known as “regions in transition” (Abruzzo, Molise, and Sardinia)<sup>13</sup>. The second part of the financial Plan started in 2019, known as “Piano Export Sud 2” – in English “Southern Export Plan 2”. It represents the extension of the time span of the Plan, and it aims at ensuring continuity in the actions implemented through the Southern Export Plan<sup>14</sup>.

### Gender gap between women-led businesses and male-led ones

It is known that in Italy there is a strong gender gap concerning women-led businesses, in comparison to the male-led ones. According to CRIF, in Italy only 22% of SMEs is led by a female boss. With a particular focus on regions, female enterprises in the country registered an index between 19% - 25%. In this case, it is possible to make a distinction between regions with high index of female enterprises, and those with a low one<sup>15</sup>.

- Regions with the high index of female enterprises: Basilicata, Molise, Umbria in Southern Italy.
- Regions with the low index of female enterprises: Lombardia and Trentino Alto Adige in Northern Italy.

<sup>11</sup>Italian Trade & Investment Agency (ITA), *Rapporto ICE 2018-2019. 7. Il sostegno pubblico all'internazionalizzazione delle imprese*, p. 299, 2019. Website: <https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/Rapporto%20ICE%202018-2019%20cap.%207%200.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup>Italian Trade & Investment Agency (ITA), *Rapporto ICE 2018-2019. 7. Il sostegno pubblico all'internazionalizzazione delle imprese*, p. 299, 2019. Website: <https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/Rapporto%20ICE%202018-2019%20cap.%207%200.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>Italian Trade & Investment Agency (ITA), *Rapporto ICE 2018-2019. 7. Il sostegno pubblico all'internazionalizzazione delle imprese*, p. 23, 2019. Website: <https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/Rapporto%20ICE%202018-2019%20cap.%207%200.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup>Italian Trade & Investment Agency (ITA), *Rapporto ICE 2018-2019. 7. Il sostegno pubblico all'internazionalizzazione delle imprese*, p. 299, 2019. Website: <https://www.ice.it/it/sites/default/files/inline-files/Rapporto%20ICE%202018-2019%20cap.%207%200.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup>CRIF for business information. “Le imprese femminili in Italia rappresentano solo il 22% del totale ma il PNRR potrebbe contribuire a ridurre il gender gap”, CONFCOMMERCIO, 2022. Website: <https://www.crif.it/area-stampa/comunicati-stampa/2022/marzo/imprese-femminili/>.

### Qualitative indicators on internationalisation in Italy: skills-gap and need assessments

In general, the national government has taken actions to spread the phenomenon in the country. Together with other Member States in Europe, Italy was eligible to the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* approved by the European Commission. In detail, this Plan helps States in Europe restoring their economies after the broke of the pandemic. In this sense, there are specific packages of reforms and public investment projects that should be implemented by 2026<sup>16</sup>.

In total, Italy is set to receive € 191.5 billion over the lifetime of its plan. This financial help will serve to implement and accelerate green and digital transition, economic and social resilience within the country<sup>17</sup>. Concerning investments to boost the potential of Italian women-led SMEs, the RRF actions will inspire the *Fund for Women's Business*. In this sense, the above-mentioned SMEs will have the chance to start and strengthen new activities to carry out innovative projects in the sectors of industry, handicrafts, processing of agricultural products, services, trade, and tourism. It is interesting to notice that this financial support consists of non-repayable contributions and subsidized loans<sup>18</sup>.

In this sense, it is evident that RRF helps especially female SMEs foster their competitiveness. Now, the question relies on the knowledge that women entrepreneurs can have about exports competitiveness. It is important to say that training curricula in Italy are available, both face to face and in digital format. Women entrepreneurs can choose to attend standard training courses about useful topic in entrepreneurship, such as financial literacy, risk management methodology (SACE website)<sup>19</sup>.

In Italy, the trend to spread internationalisation of female SMEs is represented by the network SACE – in English: *Insurance and financial services for businesses* – which designed the Program “Women in Export”. It is specialized in supporting Italian companies, in particular SMEs, which want to grow in Italy and in the global market. Through the synergy of integrated skills and insurance and financial services, the Platform offers a unique operating model in the Italian panorama, devoted to the economic development of the country. It guides Italian companies in the choice of markets and in the management of risks associated with operations in new and often little-known geographies.

Women in Export usually offers mainly Financial Consultancy to investigate what kind of competences and knowledge are necessary to boost SMEs and Companies potential based in Italy. The Platform also offers free-access knowledge on how to be competitive in global markets. Moreover, it is possible to find courses, focusing on precise aspects such as “Country Risk Analysis”, based on case studies and develop abilities on how to calculate the Index Risk of Internationalisation<sup>20</sup>.

Italian SACE analyses also the situation of skills-gap concerning female entrepreneurship. In general, Italy registers a low participation of women in the economic sector. According to SACE, only 22% of SMEs in Italy is led by female managers. Moreover, the needs assessment focuses mainly on a positive internal attitude

<sup>16</sup>European Commission, *Recovery and Resilience Facility*, 2021. Website: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en).

<sup>17</sup>European Commission, *Italy's recovery and resilience plan*, 2021. Website: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en).

<sup>18</sup>European Commission, *Italy's recovery and resilience plan*, 2021. Website: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/italys-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en).

<sup>19</sup>SACE, Training course on risk management methodology, 2022. Website: <https://www.sace.it/en/solutions/category-detail/training-advisory-services>. Last access April 5, 2022.

<sup>20</sup>SACE, example of training course about Risk Management, 2022. Website: [training-course-on-country-risk-analysis.pdf](https://www.sace.it/en/solutions/category-detail/training-advisory-services).

that female SMEs should foster. Areas of interest that can be tackled in E4F trainings in PR3 can be the following:

- How to manage funds from the European Commission. E4F could set up modules and curricula on how to correctly spend loans and financial funds, for example to purchase specific licences for Brand or for IT protection.
- Tips and suggestion related to areas of approach in Extra-EU markets. In these modules, E4F could consider the need of gaining knowledge on foreign countries: for instance, what kind of goods (especially in the Food sector) can or cannot be exported in foreign markets.

In E4F training curricula, the mentioned-above areas of interest could be involved to develop the five priorities set up in this project.

- *Mindset & Ambition*. This could surely help on developing a cross-cultural mind, so that internal staff in SMEs could gain knowledge on pros and cons in exporting to countries in Extra-EU areas.
- *Skills and competences*. Staff could develop the so-called attitude of thinking-outside-of-the-box. In this sense, the staff will be confident in approaching global markets to boost their competitiveness.
- *Understanding potential markets*. Both exploiting E4F criteria and SACE knowledge, the staff in SMEs will be prepared to understand customer needs, culture, politics.
- *Networking*. The staff will gain new skills in the use of digital platforms to identify suppliers, retailers. E4F training curricula will foster skills in communication dealing with potential customers and markets abroad.
- *Staff skills*. internationalisation requires time. E4F is to support and revamp the potential of female SMEs and microenterprises to tap into extra-EU markets export.

A focus should be necessary on the gender gap, concerning specific sector written in E4F proposal (Fashion, Food, Handicraft). Trends show that women represent the majority in leading the Fashion sector in Italy. In an article, the CNA reported that 44.7% of women has a lead role in the enterprise<sup>21</sup>. Nonetheless, there aren't results available for female presence in Handicraft and Food SMEs in Italy.

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<sup>21</sup>CNA, 8 marzo. *Le imprese femminili sono aumentate anche durante la crisi, 2022*. Website: <https://www.cna.it/8-marzo-le-imprese-femminili-sono-aumentate-anche-durante-la-crisi/>.

### Opportunities: training available and operational tools

From a training and education point of view, internationalisation of SMEs is a very crucial topic, still developing. Courses on strategies for the internationalisation of SME are offered at various level of education, both at formal and non-formal level (VET, HEI, others). In the educational system there are interesting and efficient-oriented courses dedicated to the internationalisation of SME, most of the times not specifically addressed to male rather than female business. In fact, it is possible to affirm that the Italian educational system does not address the internationalisation of SME (or other SME crucial topics) distinguishing based on the gender of the people running the business.

Nonetheless, interesting opportunities of training, specifically tailored to female business, are offered by Chambers of Commerce, industry associations, national committees and other entities aimed at the development of the SME. This kind of opportunities can be accessible at national level or at regional level, depending on the territorial coverage of the bodies promoting the various initiatives.

**Chambers of commerce** are particularly attentive to the development and needs of female run businesses. Across the national territory, Chambers of Commerce promote different kind of activities aimed at fostering the growth capacity and resilience of female businesses. It is possible to spot single events, courses (online, blended, face-to-face), webinars, thematic seminars, and tutoring services.

#### Trento Chamber of Commerce Committee for the Promotion of Female Entrepreneurship<sup>22</sup>

– The Committee for the Promotion of Female Entrepreneurship, established at the Trento Chamber of Commerce, is part of a network of structures that aim to renew and boost strategies to promote and support female entrepreneurship. The Committee's role is to disseminate the entrepreneurial culture among women, presenting itself as an active player in local development with the primary objective of promoting and supporting the establishment and consolidation of women's businesses and contributing, in this way, to increasing employment, economic growth and the competitiveness of local systems and the country. The Committee for the Promotion of Women's Entrepreneurship coordinates initiatives aimed at the development of local enterprises from a gender perspective.

In particular: training courses and information conferences for female entrepreneurs, aspiring entrepreneurs, freelancers and family helpers organised by *Accademia d'Impresa*<sup>23</sup>; establishment of two prizes for dissertations on female entrepreneurship, in collaboration with the University of Trento; quarterly analyses of data on female entrepreneurship, carried out by the Trento Chamber of Commerce's Studies and Research Office; organisation of thematic seminars on topics concerning the promotion of female entrepreneurship.



CAMERA  
DI COMMERCIO  
INDUSTRIA  
ARTIGIANATO  
E AGRICOLTURA  
DI TRENTO

*Pronti all'impresa*

<sup>22</sup>Camera di Commercio Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Trento. "Comitato per la promozione dell'imprenditoria femminile". Camera di Commercio Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Trento. 2022. Website: <https://www.tn.camcom.it/content/comitato-la-promozione-dellimprenditoria-femminile-0#:~:text=Il%20Comitato%20per%20la%20promozione,e%20sostegno%20all'imprenditoria%20femminile.>

<sup>23</sup>Accademia D'Impresa: <https://www.accademiadimpresa.it/>.



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**CNA**<sup>24</sup> - Founded in 1946, the CNA, National Confederation of Craftsmen and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, has around 623,000 members who employ over 1.2 million people. CNA represents the largest representative association distributed throughout the territory. The enormous diffusion of crafts and small enterprises, both in big cities and small towns, is matched by a widespread presence: CNA is present in all Italian provinces. The Confederation is attentive to the fair and sustainable development of female business and for each regional branch, there is a section specifically dedicated to female run enterprises (ex.: CNA Veneto Ovest<sup>25</sup>). Services offered to female businesses are related to business start-up, credit, benefits and contributions, social security and welfare, subsidised purchases, energy saving, mortgage, public tenders, employment consultancy. Furthermore, training, and coaching services focus on the market positioning of the product or service, on the technology and sustainability of the company, and on networking to give the business a solid foundation.



**Agenzia ICE – Italian Trade Agency** organised different editions of the *Digital Export Academy* for enterprises. In particular, in cooperation with CNA, it has implemented the training course on 'female entrepreneurship and digital communication for foreign markets'<sup>26</sup>.



**SACE – Women in Export**<sup>27</sup> is the first Italian export business network promoted by SACE Education, the SACE training hub that supports Italian companies in their growth processes in Italy and abroad. Its objective is to create a true ecosystem capable of empowering, connecting, and supporting the best female professionals in Italy who are involved in export and internationalisation, to generate cross-sector synergies and trigger a social impact on the Italian entrepreneurial scene and on the performance of Made in Italy worldwide. Numerous training activities are promoted by SACE: online and face-to-face training sessions, specialised networking moments, one-to-one lessons with experts, managerial growth paths and mentoring. Appointments are free of charge for those enrolled in the training programme in which topics related to the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) are addressed to seize and ground the opportunities arising from the Next Generation EU stimulus package; to the ecological transition and digital transformation; to sustainable finance and insurance-financial tools to support businesses.

<sup>24</sup>CNA Impresa donna: <https://www.cna.it/tag/cna-impresa-donna/>.

<sup>25</sup>CNA Impresa donna, *Insieme per fare strada*: <https://www.cnavenetovest.it/cna-impresa-donna>.

<sup>26</sup>Italian Trade Agency: <https://expotraining.ice.it/offerta-formativa/formazione-imprese/digital-export-academy-percorso-tematico-e-affiancamento-cna/#>.

<sup>27</sup>SACE: <https://www.sace.it/media/eventi/dettaglio-ciclo/women-in-export>.

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26 maggio 2022 - Corsi Education

Iscriviti

**OTB Group Foundation and Bocconi University<sup>28</sup>** – Concerning opportunities at Higher Education level, the OTB Group Foundation finances the costs of a two-year master's degree course at Bocconi University for selected students, who will be able to choose among different courses - Economics and Management of Government and International Organisations; Politics and Policy Analysis; International Management; Management - that will allow them to enter the world of work in two fields, public administration and management of large companies.

**Fondo Impresa Femminile<sup>29</sup>** – The Women's Enterprise Fund is the national incentive that supports the creation and consolidation of women-led businesses, promoted by the Ministry of Economic Development. The measure had a total budget of around EUR 200 million, of which EUR 160 million from PNRR resources and EUR 40 million allocated by the 2021 Budget Law. The incentives were granted for investment programmes in the industrial, craft, agricultural product processing, services, trade, and tourism sectors. Proponents were also able to apply for technical and management tutoring to accompany businesses in making use of the facilities, support them in preparing loan applications, and transfer specialist skills.

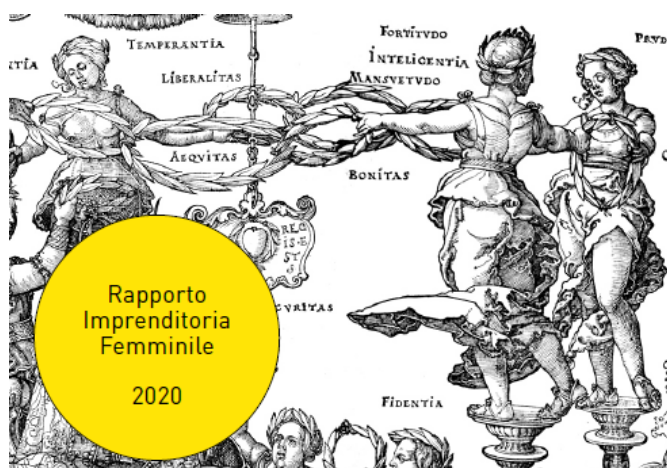


<sup>28</sup>Il Sole 24 ore. “Fondazione Gruppo OTB e Università Bocconi per formare la classe dirigente femminile del futuro”. Il Sole 24 ore. 2022. Website: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/fondazione-gruppo-otb-e-universita-bocconi-formare-classe-dirigente-femminile-futuro-AEw4TQEB>

<sup>29</sup>Ministero dello sviluppo economico (MISE). “Fondo impresa femminile”. MISE. 2022. <https://www.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/incentivi/impresa/fondo-a-sostegno-impresa-femminile>

## Challenges

According to the OECD Policy paper “*Trade and Gender. A framework of analysis*”<sup>30</sup>, women-led businesses generally reap the benefits of international trade less than those owned by men, mostly because they are smaller, less well financed and benefit less from professional business networks. This affirmation is verifiable also for the Italian specific situation, although it is possible to consider other challenging factors as well.



As stated in the “*IV Report on Female Entrepreneurship*”<sup>31</sup> by Unioncamere, young female entrepreneurs have a **lower propensity for innovation** than their male peers (56% of young female enterprises have introduced innovations in their business compared to 59% of young male enterprises); they **invest less in digital technologies** of Industry 4.0 (19% vs. 25% of male enterprises); they are **less internationalised** (9% vs. 13%); they have a **difficult relationship with credit** (46% of under-35 female enterprises are financed with personal or family capital) In addition, only 20% of young women's enterprises

make considerable use of bank credit and, of all the enterprises under 35 that apply for it, it is more the young female enterprises, compared to male enterprises, who complain that their request has not been granted or has only been partially granted by banking institutions (8% vs. 4%).

**COVID-19** pandemic represented a great challenge for female business. At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, facing the new and unforeseen situation, many aspiring female entrepreneurs must have seen fit to stop and wait for a more propitious moment. Between April and June 2020, in fact, new business registrations led by women are more than 10 thousand fewer than in the same quarter of 2019. This decline, equal to -42.3%, is greater than that recorded by male-led businesses (-35.2%). A survey conducted by Unioncamere in October 2020 on a sample of 2,000 manufacturing and service companies clearly showed that the response to the crisis by female entrepreneurs was somewhat different from that of their male colleagues. If the drop in demand is the most reported critical element in both cases, businesswomen showed that they have more problems with liquidity (38% of female entrepreneurs declare this compared to 33% of male entrepreneurs) and the procurement of supplies (30% compared to 23%). Women entrepreneurs also complained of more difficulties related to declining employment (23% vs. 17%), more constraints in accessing credit (18% vs. 15%) and technological problems (16% vs. 12%).

The CNA Report “*Women entrepreneurship after one year of Covid*”<sup>32</sup> explains how, in addition to the difficulties generated by COVID-19 for female entrepreneurs, many problems remain unresolved, which even in normal times restrain and discourage female employment. Among these, **work-family balance** is for most women entrepreneurs a crucial problem that must be tackled with a very responsible and constructive attitude. The solution lies not



<sup>30</sup>Korinek, J., E. Moïse and J. Tange (2021), "Trade and gender: A Framework of analysis", OECD Trade Policy Papers, No. 246, OECD Publishing, Paris. Website: <https://doi.org/10.1787/6db59d80-en>.

<sup>31</sup>UNIONCAMERE. Rapporto Imprenditoria Femminile. 2020. <https://www.camera.it/temiap/2021/02/26/OCD177-4840.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup>CENTRO STUDI CNA. L'imprenditoria femminile dopo un anno di Covid. 2021. Website: <https://www.cnare.it/files/news/allegati/indagine-imprenditoria-femminile.pdf>.

so much in family allowances or other cash transfers that can be paid out immediately, but in spending on investments in social services and infrastructure for early childhood and family care in general.

Regarding the political and economic context of Italy, the women entrepreneurs also believe that there is still not the right **perception** of the value of women's work, which continues to be seen as a 'weak element' of the system rather than as a 'primary resource' to be valorised and brought to the fore to promote economic recovery. For women entrepreneurs, the perception persists that female entrepreneurship in Italy is held in false esteem and, beyond the occasional positive judgement, is not held in the same esteem as male entrepreneurship. The prejudice against female entrepreneurs, instead of being perceived as an element capable of accelerating the country's growth, define them as a weak group to be supported. Lastly, **public opinion** would even show a lack of interest in female entrepreneurship, considering it a minor issue.

Some final observation on the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Italy from the European Union. According to the “**Council Recommendation** on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Italy and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Italy<sup>33</sup>”, the **gender gap** in employment levels in Italy remains one of the highest in the EU, and the **employment rate** of women, although slightly increasing, is far below the EU average (53.1% compared to 67.4% in 2018). Investment in **care services** and **women's participation** in the labour market remains insufficient, as do measures to promote **equal opportunities** and adequate **work-life balance policies**. A comprehensive strategy to promote women's labour market participation is still lacking. Although compulsory paternity leave has been marginally extended, the parental leave system remains inadequate and, together with **underdeveloped childcare and long-term care services**, tends to hinder the employment of women with children or family members in need of care.

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<sup>33</sup>Council Recommendation on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Italy and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Italy, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0512>.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings of this report concerning the condition of female SMEs in Italy could be resumed into bullet points, concerning pros and cons of the current didactical/operational means, economic support available in Italy. First, considerations must be done regarding the pros of the existing training curricula set up by SACE:

- The existing training curricula in Italy give female SMEs the right amount of knowledge on how to approach global markets.
- Based on WEGATE reports, SACE highlighted that female SMEs have a lack of confidence in externalising their businesses, due to insufficient available means in the country.
- SACE modules introduce female SMEs to new several topics, such as: approaching new markets abroad, rules and traditions related to countries for exporting goods, online workshops, and webinars on how to develop the “thinking-out-of-the-box” attitudes.

Concerning the economic support, the findings show that the Italian government has been working to establish new financial support to national SMEs. The evidence is represented by the Fund for Women’s Business and *Italy’s Recovery and Resilience Plan*. From an economic perspective, these two initiatives have been helping Italian enterprises in their renovation, modernisation, and digitalisation.

In this view, the cons rely on the negative impacts of COVID-19 in Italy and that led SMEs lose their confidence in externalising their businesses. It is also important to remind that the pandemic caused the closing of about 300.000 enterprises in Italy. Fortunately, the Italian government responded to the European need of supporting enterprises, especially the smallest ones and start-ups. As evidence, this is confirmed by the adoption of RRF economic support.

Regarding the theoretical knowledge, a consideration must be written about SACE modules available in Italy. Even though these ones give information and tips on how to approach customers abroad, they appear to be static, separated, and not included in the optic of how to internationalise the business. The fact is that they represent global contents around the main topic: the internationalisation of female SMEs. So that, if integrated by E4F mentoring sessions, they could help the internal staff to gain new knowledge and perspectives. In this sense, SACE could also boost digital competences within the enterprise, as it gives the possibility of taking workshops and webinars online and physically in a specific location in Italy.

As a matter of fact, in Italy female SMEs are growing in their potential, as statistics show that the most relevant sector in SMEs is in Fashion entrepreneurship. These considerations confirm that it is necessary to implement E4F project in Italy because women-led businesses could reach a double purpose, from the following points of view:

- Theoretical point of view. By consulting SACE, female SMEs could gain knowledge on how to internationalise their exports.
- Operational point of view. Women have the possibility to boost the use of digital tools, to create a network in global market or in a specific market abroad.

As final, it is possible to state that female entrepreneurs in Italy have the possibility to take courses on how to conduct their businesses. On the other hand, the existing trainings programmes in Italy strongly need to be integrated by the coaching and mentoring offered by E4F. In a general view, Italy is in the need of implementing new specific programs that could help female SMEs to develop an international mindset and entering the global markets.

E4F : Femmes Chefs d'entreprise à l'Export hors de l'EU  
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