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*DEBUTING — Developing Business Through Inclusiveness and  
Gender Awareness - New Cluster Competences*

**Design and Results of a Joint Needs**

**Analysis for Policy Change and Business**

**Development**

**through European Collaboration 2023-2024**

**Interreg  
Europe**



Co-funded by  
the European Union



**DEBUTING**

CENTRUM FÖR  
GENUSFORSKNING

## DEBUTING project

**DEBUTING** supports SMEs via clusters to increase their business capacities and sustainability by adopting an inclusive culture based on gender equality.

DEBUTING aims to improve 11 policy instruments to better address gender equality in industry supporting at least 10% of clustered SMEs to become more competitive by 2026.

## Project partners

- Region Värmland (SE)
- Karlstad University (SE)
- Regional Council of Lapland (FI)
- Regional Development Agency North-West (RO)
- ecoplus. The Business Agency of Lower Austria (AT)
- Ministry of Public Administration and Regional Development (HU)
- ART-ER Joint Stock Consortium Company (IT)
- Navarra Development Agency (SODENA) (ES)
- Pomorskie Voivodeship (PL)
- Grand E-nov+ (FR)
- RegioClusterAgentur BW (DE)
- Ungheni City Hall (MD)



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<sup>1</sup> Not included in the report as *Ungheni City Hall* joined the partnership after the needs analysis was done.

# SUMMARY

This report presents the process and results of designing a joint analysis for evaluating regional gender equality needs, based on the input from 10 European partners in the project DEBUTING (Developing Business Through Inclusiveness and Gender Awareness) within its first year (2023-2024). The report explains how the Karlstad University (Kau) team and the 10 European partners in the project worked together toward increasing gender equality for business development in SMEs. It presents the steps and methods used during this year and the rationale behind the choice of methods. The results section provides a joint analysis of the partners' self-evaluation of the gender equality situation in their local context and their performance during the DEBUTING project in 2023-2024. It also identifies common needs which will form the basis of future work, as outlined in the suggestions for work to be conducted within the format of specified focus groups.

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# INTRODUCTION

*The key objectives are ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics. The Strategy pursues a dual approach of gender mainstreaming combined with targeted actions, and intersectionality is a horizontal principle for its implementation. While the Strategy focuses on actions within the EU, it is coherent with the EU's external policy on gender equality and women's empowerment. (EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025)*

This report presents the process of designing a joint needs analysis for evaluating regional gender equality needs in the project Developing Business Through Inclusiveness and Gender Awareness (DEBUTING). The report also presents the results of the mentioned joint analysis, carried out by the partners during the first year of the project (March 2023 - March 2024), which was curated and analysed by the Karlstad University team through a questionnaire. This report is the first of the two reports that Karlstad University produces about leading this process in their role as the advisory partner within DEBUTING2.

The report begins with an introduction explaining the objectives and background of DEBUTING. In section one which follows the introduction, we summarise the process in which the Karlstad University (Kau) team and the partners worked together toward increasing gender equality in SMEs through a co-production method and a gender transformative work with the clusters in the project. The gender equality work carried out

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<sup>2</sup> The second report will be presented in semester six of the project and shall cover the focus groups activities and outcome, as well as experiences from staff exchange and learnings from good practices shared within the project.

in the first year of the DEBUTING project was aligned with the EU's equality strategy mentioned in the opening quote (an intersectionality-informed gender mainstreaming aimed at targeted actions), aiming at empowering the SMEs to work towards achieving gender equality. Anchored to this goal, section 1 explains the process in which Kau provided an example of "how to" work with intersectionality-informed gender mainstreaming aimed at targeted actions in two steps: one, coaching and baselining partners' knowledge of gender equality, and two, doing a multilayered and multi-method needs analysis.

The second section of the report provides a joint analysis of the partners' self-evaluation of the gender equality situation in their local context based on their experience when working with action-oriented intersectionality-informed gender mainstreaming as explained in section one. To put it differently, coached by the Karlstad University team, partners within the project followed localised versions of the mentioned two steps toward identifying the gender equality needs in SMEs in their regions. The findings, which conclude the second section, provide inspiration and support to the partners for starting implementing actions towards the targeted goals within the DEBUTING project. In other words, the findings suggest potential themes for the focus groups, to be organised within the project, in which partners that face similar challenges will meet, exchange knowledge and discuss strategies for solving the identified challenges in working with gender equality in SMEs via clusters. The focus groups also aim to provide suggestions for regional policy/strategy change.

The report finishes with concluding remarks.

## DEBUTING PROJECT

*In 2021 we started to prepare the first xxx Cluster Strategy for 2030, focusing mainly on the strong economic power of collaboration. Recognizing that gender equality and inclusion are important factors to ensure the SME's competitiveness in the short and long term, by increasing their access to talents and markets. We are aware that the companies need support to create corresponding business models and work cultures. We, therefore, believe that SME challenges related to the equality and inclusion of different groups can be addressed and solved by raising awareness and inspiring clusters as well as by promoting solutions to these issues at the cluster level, as their company members are the frontrunner enterprises in their industry and having a strong influence on various areas. Partner 10<sup>3</sup>*

The project DEBUTING, which is implemented in the framework of the Interreg Europe program and co-financed by the European Union, started in March 2023 and ends in May 2027. The name is an acronym for *Developing Business Through Inclusiveness and Gender Awareness*. The name states the mission – to debut a new idea: to approach *gender equality as an SME competitiveness factor* rather than only a social justice issue. It is also to debut new ways of working with gender equality *via clusters and in a policy context*. In other words, the aim is to work on increasing the understanding of the business rationale behind gender equality in Small and Medium-sized Enterprise's (SMEs) and to support them to increase their business capacities and sustainability by adopting a gender-equal and inclusive culture.

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<sup>3</sup> The numbers given to the partners here are not the same as the ones presented in the project application. The numbers given to the partners here are random to anonymise them.



According to previous studies, the policy level needs to create better frameworks for implementing gender equality measures to support SMEs and help them stay competitive, innovative, and able to develop new market opportunities (Thystrup 2020). In DEBUTING the partners address this challenge by rethinking policy and suggesting policy change in clusters and on regional levels. Moreover, in addition to policy instruments, there is a need for capacity building to develop gender-inclusive business models and gender-friendly work cultures in companies (William et al. 2023; Joensuu-Salo et al. 2024, Aidis et.al, 2021). In DEBUTING, the partners work not only with policy change but also with the “how to” of gender equality work, that is, how to implement the policy changes that they seek in practice. This is important because according to many studies, even if companies/organisations understand gender equality as an important factor to work towards, the knowledge of “how to do it in practice” is lacking (Lindberg, Mellström, and Wennberg 2022). In DEBUTING, clusters that are key actors in designing and implementing the Smart Specialisation Strategies agenda are mobilised as potential “agents of change” that can support SMEs to adopt gender equality measures. Therefore, DEBUTING works with clusters as influential actors who can be trained in gender equality work and support their member companies.

Lastly, DEBUTING further creates a co-production platform for the partners to share their experiences of working with gender equality and exchange good examples of gender equality work for inspiration within the European context. This exchange of experiences is in line with the EU’s soft policy on gender mainstreaming through horizontal knowledge transfer among different EU members. This strategy enables collaborative projects, such as DEBUTING, to become a learning space and a practical policy laboratory where partners can rethink the gender-blind spots in regional/EU strategies/policies (Mazey 2002).

## BACKGROUND

According to the update of the 2020 New Industrial Strategy, “addressing skills gaps and inequalities, the EU should build on all the strengths of its talented, well-educated and inventive workers and entrepreneurs as a force for innovation and competitiveness.” DEBUTING works with gender equality as a way to achieve the goal of this strategy through policy changes that the partners choose to work with during the run of the project. In total, the project will target 10 policy instruments, chosen by the partners to work more specifically with during the project: Two ERDF (European Development Fund) Operational Programmes for Investment for Growth and Jobs and six Smart Specialisation Strategies. The project achieves this by connecting them to cluster strategies; a national cluster strategy in Hungary, and a cluster policy program in Lower Austria. In other words, at the EU level, we expect DEBUTING to contribute to the vision, policy objective, and actions presented in the EU’s SME strategy as well as the Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025); that is, to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by making concrete progress in gender equality within SMEs. We do this by encouraging the partners to take on “a gender perspective in all policy areas, at all levels and at all stages of policy-making” (ibid) and include “concrete actions like improving the balance between women and men in decision-making positions (...), or encouraging a more balanced participation of women and men in all work sectors.” (ibid) This work is led by Karlstad University which is the advisory partner.

As the advisory partner, Kau’s team will share their expertise rooted in working in similar collaborative models such as the *Academy for Smart Specialisation*. This collaborative model was formed through an agreement between Kau and the Region of Värmland to generate skills and research output relevant to the region. The aim was to increase the capacity for recognising and advancing key local assets and emerging industries, through a focus on inclusivity as a key factor. Another example of such collaborative work is the GenusAkademin (Gender Academy/GA) project (2018-2022), which successfully aimed at

empowering SMEs to incorporate gender equality and diversity and was led by the Centre for Gender Studies at Kau. It is these previous experiences of working with gender equality and diversity with SMEs, policymakers, and clusters connected to innovation that the Kau team offers to DEBUTING in the role of advisory partner. In other words, Kau facilitates the exchange of experience processes between diverse stakeholders (through moderation, survey design, and reports) in relation to the intersection of gender equality and innovation which is the core of DEBUTING.

Therefore, Karlstad University was tasked with organising specific activities to facilitate and accelerate the exchange of experiences between partners, such as designing and collecting data for the joint analysis presented in this report. Another example is defining the focus groups based on the results of this joint analysis. The focus groups will aim to deepen the scope of knowledge/experience exchange among the partners with a shared interest in given areas.

## CO-CREATION, AND GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE PLATFORMS

*We want to find a pattern or typology of companies that are having good results in terms of gender equality and that could be used as a model for others, extracting the best practices. We expect a better understanding of why inequality exists, beyond obvious thoughts. Very often, when working on equality, we conclude that there are fewer women in certain positions because there are not enough female candidates (the percentage of women trained in certain skills is low), so solutions are in the long term. How can this be accelerated? What could be done to have results in the short term? And for those issues that require a long period, are we defining the correct policies or instruments? We want to ensure that we set the correct bases in our policies. We expect the other regions' experiences to bring us some light. Probably we evaluate measures we already have and*

*we try to improve them. But we need new ideas, we should think outside the box.  
Debuting is our chance. (Partner 4)*

In a scoping review of gender equality interventions within the global context, Guthridge and colleagues (2022) discovered that most gender equality intervention programs fail or would not deliver a long-lasting effect. Applying a multi-layered analysis (including microlevel, mesolevel, and macrolevel analyses of the programs), they argue that the three levels should be approached simultaneously for change to become more sustainable.<sup>4</sup> In other words, a trickle-down approach to gender equality often fails to deliver lasting social change as strategies, policies, and legal interventions fail to be implemented in meaningful ways if they are not tuned to the local specificities of the context in which they seek to achieve change (Mazey 2002). More sustainable and lasting changes are those in which top-down initiatives are combined with bottom-up approaches, taking into consideration the locally specific needs and possibilities (Guthridge et al., 2022; Bellingheri et al., 2021). Working with gender equality on societal, institutional, organisational, and personal levels simultaneously is a gender transformative approach that enables capacity building and increases the readiness of different societal units for change towards gender equality (see for example models provided by Vinnova<sup>5</sup> or Tech for Gender Equality<sup>6</sup>).

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<sup>4</sup> They explain that “microlevel variables include individual characteristics, including biology, beliefs, behaviours, values, and emotions, such as empathy and resentment. Mesolevel contextual factors include interpersonal interactions in family, work, and school etc. (e.g. gender segregation), and macrolevel context includes broader social and cultural norms, including religion and politics.” (Guthridge et al. 2022, 320).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vinnova.se/en/m/med-nova-in-hand---norm-creative-innovation/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://techforgenerationequality.org/innovation/>

Many scholars such as Bacchi and Eveline (2010), Lavena and Riccucci, (2012), Lomazzi and Crespi (2019: 31), Bosáková (2018), and Callerstig and Lindholm (2016) have discussed different elements of what a gender transformative approach is. For example, a transformative approach engages with “norms and practices that produce gender inequalities by highlighting and intervening in the gendering process of policymaking” (Lomazzi and Crespi, 2019: 31). It works with such norms in everyday life in different social settings as well as in meta discourses of gender (2022; 2014), which is only possible if a multi-sectorial collaboration is initiated in which stakeholders work together towards achieving gender equality. In other words, a transformative approach is achievable through co-creation methods (e.g. participatory action research) in which stakeholders are aligned on what needs to be prioritised, how to work with change, and how to proceed with further implementation of gender equality goals (ibid.). Co-creation is an emancipatory mode of knowledge production about challenges and problem-solving for shared struggles, in which experts, users, and other stakeholders work together. It is often used as a strategy for organisational and societal development by practitioners and researchers alike. As Lindberg and colleagues argue, co-creation has become part of a global trend of “improving the societal impact and the societal relevance of science and innovation” turning co-creative platforms in the forms of networks, partnerships, projects, events, and more into a crucial part of problem-solving in practice (2022).

When working with the Gender Academy project, the Kau team applied one such co-creation method of working with stakeholders towards gender transformation. The project aimed to create a platform “for university-society cooperation on knowledge-based gender equality practices” which was initiated by and placed at the Centre for Gender Studies, Karlstad University (Lindberg, Mellström, and Wennberg 2022, 162). The project was also “part of a regional declaration of intent for university-society cooperation on smart specialization, signed by the university and the regional county council” (ibid.). Within the scope of the project, Kau was to enable SMEs to increase their competitiveness through improving gender equality in their companies. The goals were to be achieved

through “joint learning by university researchers and company representatives, where they jointly manage gender equality measures in the companies, workshops with all companies for mutual learning, as well as the development of digital tools” (ibid.). The project targeted mostly male-dominated sectors such as forestry, transport, ICT, steel, and food but also the more female-dominated sector of wellness. It also worked with creating a network for cooperation in which not only SMEs and the university were involved but also the regional actors, public offices, and municipalities in the region. They worked with the regional office to create a multi-actor platform for gender equality work in SMEs (ibid.) In other words, GA provided a platform in which experts and stakeholders could jointly “identify, explore and address societal and organizational challenges” connected to gender equality (ibid. 158). Such mobilisation of a multi-level, multi-actor network comprised of “various societal sectors, organizations, and communities” into a co-creative platform aimed at developing new solutions to societal challenges (here, gender equality). Co-creation in this context becomes an example of social innovation, or as Lindberg and colleagues argue, a gendered social innovation through co-creation (ibid.).

In DEBUTING we shared this example of a “gendered social innovation through co-creation” (Lindberg, Mellström, and Wennberg 2022) as we built on similar initiatives and goals as in GA with some adjustments based on the learnings from that project. For example, GA was initially focused on working closely with the SMEs to improve gender equality which proved to be challenging for different reasons. To start with, the lack of internal resources among the companies made it very difficult for them to fully commit to the time-consuming gender transformation process. The use of surveys was another aspect that was proven difficult as respondents could be identified due to the small size of the company or the company managers presenting concerns and discomfort. Another dilemma was the “stakeholder’s ability and willingness to prioritize participation due to personnel turnover, re-organization, ownership transfer, and market fluctuation ... These

challenges have been addressed by further tailoring the activities and interactions to the stakeholders' needs and preconditions, with varying degree of success" (ibid; 164).

Therefore, for DEBUTING we suggested a shift in collaboration wherein the focus would be placed on enabling the clusters as a nodal figure for gender equality work and providing support to the SMEs, instead of working with the companies themselves. We suggested that mobilising the capacity of the clusters in this regard can provide support to the companies in the face of limited resources and time, while at the same time creating a network of gender equality among the member companies that can support each other. Moreover, mobilising the clusters would also help with the element of trust, where it is not the university "using" the companies for research but it is the cluster that leads the way.

The project aims for the partners to engage stakeholders in the process of "joint identification, exploration" and problem-solving for implementing gender equality in SMEs with the help of clusters. Like in GA, we encouraged the partners to start with a locally specific multilayered analysis of gender equality needs in their context with their stakeholders to define the existing gender equality challenges on the three levels of micro/meso/macro and set the goals for how to work towards change together, which we explain in the next section of the report.

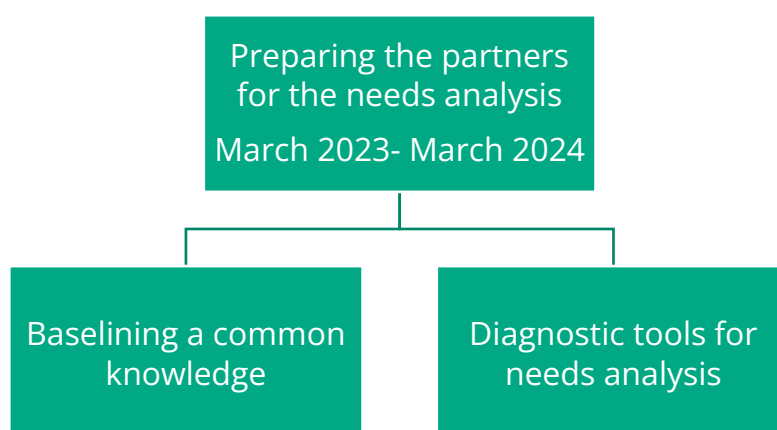


# SECTION 1: THE PROCESS



# PREPARING THE PARTNERS FOR DOING A NEEDS ANALYSIS

In the DEBUTING project, we prepared the partners through two steps: 1) baselining a common theoretical ground through lectures and exercises, and 2) Providing diagnostic tools for a local needs analysis. The two steps aimed to empower the partners to look at innovation through an intersectionality-informed gender equality lens. This would prepare them to tackle their regional challenges in the upcoming work within the time frame of the project. In what follows we explain these two steps and the rationale behind them.



## THEORETICAL GROUND: GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

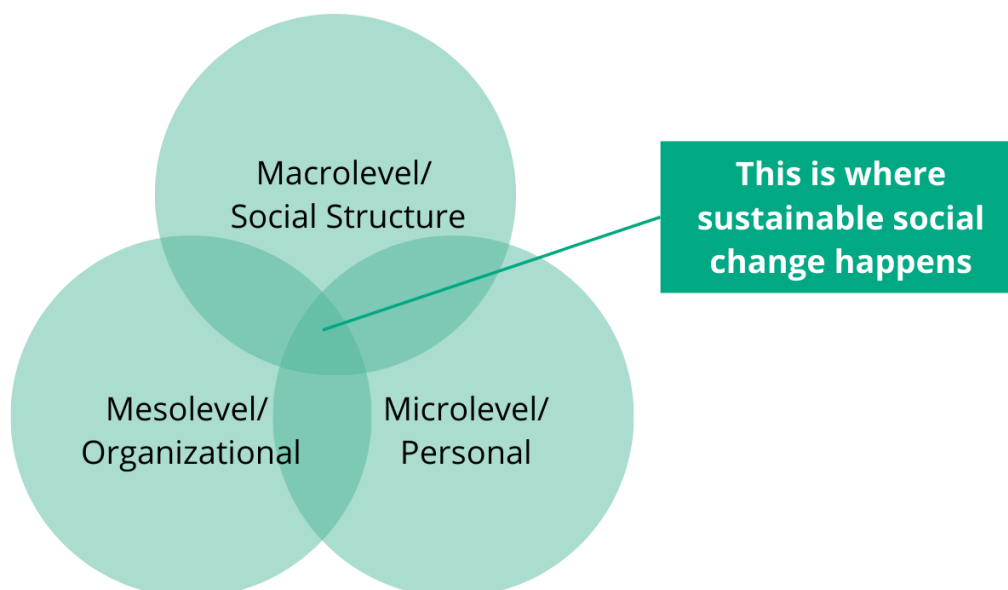
*The overall mindset of a society has a significant impact on gender inequality. How society determines the differences and values of men vs. women plays a starring role in every arena, whether it's employment, the legal system, or healthcare. Beliefs about gender run deep and even though progress can be made through laws and structural changes, there's often a pushback following*

*times of major change. It's also common for everyone (men and women) to ignore other areas of gender inequality when there's progress, such as better representation of women in leadership. These types of mindsets prop up gender inequality and delay significant change. (Partner 7)*

*I am way more alert and able to spot inequality and go beyond the first 'layer' to try and understand why certain behaviour occurs and what triggers it. (Partner 2)*

Though policy and strategy documents such as *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* are often distributed and are taken as guidelines in different national contexts, implementation of these guidelines tends to vary in different contexts as the local understanding of gender and gender equality is always negotiated and differs from location to location (Mazey 2002). In other words, sociocultural norms about gender not only shape the local understanding of gender equality and policy discourses but also set in motion limits, possibilities, and modes of policy implementation in practice.

In this report, when speaking of sociocultural norms, we include micro-level (as in behaviours, values, and emotions), meso-level (in the context of social units such as a workplace/organisation), and macro-level (as in the broader societal scope of culture) (Guthridge et al. 2022). For social change interventions such as gender equality to take effect and be sustainable, actions must address all three levels simultaneously and be aligned with one another (ibid) as we explain here.



Each geopolitical context has its historical development, social norms, environmental conditions, cultural and ethnic diversity, religions, and so on. Gender as a social construct is an everchanging concept shaped by these multiple elements (Lykke 2010). For example, over time we have witnessed continuously shifting discussions about what gender is, or how an individual's possibilities, roles, and responsibilities in a given society should/should not be defined based on their gender, as different political parties take office in different countries (Otero-Hermida & Lorenzo 2020). We use the term social construction to bring to attention the processes in which gender as a concept and gender equality agendas as guidelines/discourses are defined and put to work in various ways in given contexts. This theoretical approach allows reflection on how situated definitions of gender, and, by extension, the gender equality plans built on them, shape and organise modern societies along the line of gender. Discussing gender on this societal level (the macrolevel) helps us see how gender is not only a personal matter but how it is incorporated into the fabric of modern-day structures and institutions that operate through the powerful discourses of law, science, politics, and the media to name a few. It is the embeddedness of gender in the structural and institutional apparatus that also

enables them as important instruments for change toward equality. It is because of the immense power that these discourses carry that it is crucial to revisit and review the gender equality agenda proposed and promoted by these discourses continuously and ask if they are tuned to the needs of the society they aim to represent (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Graversen 2020, Sjö & Callerstig 2023).

Sociocultural norms about gender and gender equality are also embedded in, and produced within, smaller units of society (e.g., a family, a company, or an organisation). These local norms may conform to the cultural norms at the macrolevel, or they may clash and challenge them (for example, when economic profit overrides social sustainability and equal rights). As these multiple-level, multi-sited cultures interact, different notions of gender and gender equality may be evoked that reinforce, compete with, or cancel out one another (Griffin 2020). To understand and analyse the complexity of gender norms, it is crucial to look at the everyday culture and the interpersonal relations among the members in these smaller social units, that is the mesolevel. For example, in certain contexts (a company or an organisation) an individual's place within the organisation, responsibilities, and possibilities for future development are affected by their gender. Moreover, such gendered ways of managing and interacting within a given context are often normalised and justified under the rubric of company/organization culture, with which individuals are expected to comply (for example, in male-dominated industries such as forestry or welding, certain "masculine" characteristics such as toughness are normalised). In such gendered cultures, many individuals within an organisation/company reproduce, internalise, and even identify with these gendered norms as they live through them. This is one of the reasons why many trickle-down gender equality initiatives are proven ineffective or simply fade away after a while, because they do not take into consideration the local cultures of the site or sector in which they seek to implement change (Wynn 2020; Sjö & Callerstig 2023; Starnski & Son Hing 2015).

This becomes further complicated as a personal/individual understanding of gender and gender equality enters the equation, as each individual carries certain stereotypes and values about gender with them. It is therefore important to include the personal dimensions of gender when planning change in a specific context. For example, learning from individual experiences of gender inequality and individual needs could give focused directions to the gender equality work in the organisation. The personal aspect of gender becomes important at the implementation level as it is important to get everyone on board. For example, studies show that one of the problems that gender equality initiatives struggle with is getting men on board because they do not identify with how gender and gender equality plans are described (Guthridge et al. 2020). Thinking about gender and its implications on an individual level constitutes the microlevel of analysis in understanding needs and challenges regarding gender mainstreaming in companies/organisations.

To summarise, the multilayered complexities of how gender as a concept is understood, and how gender equality initiatives and policies are built on such complex understandings of gender, highlight that neither gender nor gender equality are given universal concepts. It is, therefore, crucial to start a gender equality initiative by establishing a shared notion of gender and gender equality to help navigate partners toward a common goal, especially when different countries are involved as is the case in DEBUTING (see Action Coalition<sup>7</sup>). Establishing a common shared understanding of gender is not meant to limit partners, nor to force them to abide by one way of describing gender/gender equality. It is rather to establish a starting point from which different partners can depart in their given context while being able to communicate findings with one another in meaningful ways.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://techforgenerationequality.org/innovation/> Last visited, 19/05/2024

We did this baselining through different presentations on gender and gender equality when we visited different partners for face-to-face meetings.

| Karlstad meeting<br>April 2023        | Rovaniemi meeting<br>June 2023   | Strasbourg meeting<br>October 2023       | Stuttgart meeting<br>January 2024  |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Mapping gender & gender equality work | Introducing the method & guide to needs analysis<br><br>Introducing intersectionality as a concept | Coaching for the needs analysis workshop | Partners presentation of their findings based on the needs analysis<br><br>Discussion on challenges to continue the work |

## BASELINING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER EQUALITY

*I am wearing a gender equality glass every day now and see things I never saw before.*  
(Partner 5)

*We have acquired new knowledge and a broader vision in conceptual terms and possible applications, including the concept of intersectionality. Furthermore, it is interesting to see gender equality not only from the point of view of social rights but also of economic benefits, innovation and growth and above all from the perspective that diversity brings value. During the project's animation activities, we directly experienced the mechanisms of cognitive biases and understood how important it is to work on this, especially in companies and in the private sector in general. We have also discovered that in our region there are many more initiatives and good practices than we thought, although there is still a long way to go. Finally, the knowledge we are acquiring is useful in promoting a culture of gender equality in our company by fueling*

*the creation and implementation of activities within the recently approved GEP.*  
(Partner 1)

Before the kick-off meeting in Karlstad (April 2023), partners were asked to answer four questions to describe gender equality from their point of view and the company/organisation they represent. Additionally, they were asked to share with the Kau team the gender equality challenges in their regions. The purpose of this exercise was for the Kau team to understand how different partners approach gender equality in order to be able to design a plan for knowledge transfer and to establish a baseline among the partners. Another purpose of posing the questions was for the partners to start thinking about gender and gender equality on different levels. Lastly, their answers to the questions would become a checkpoint against which they could see the change in their perception of gender equality work at the end of the project. Four major issues were identified in these responses: gender equality as a top-down matter strongly connected to policy discourses; gender equality and body count; gender equality being dismissed as a radical matter among stakeholders; gender as a binary and gender equality as equivalent to improvement of women's situation.

#### GENDER EQUALITY AS A TOP-DOWN MATTER CONNECTED TO POLICY

*The awareness is well present towards public authorities. The region is committed to various actions (e.g., the emancipation of women, the fight against harassment, the equality prize, the fight against violence, the awareness of high school students to discrimination, promoting gender diversity in the workplace, and information centres for women's and family rights). A second multi-year plan of action in favour of gender equality 2023-2025 has just been published and deals with professional equality within the regional authority, the fight against violence against women, and actions in favour of gender equality in the region.*

(Partner 3)

As presented in the quote, when discussing gender equality work, some of the partners started by talking about regional initiatives and the awareness among high-ranking officials. Some argued that an overall awareness of gender equality exists among the regional actors, especially the higher authorities. Others highlighted that such awareness is lacking among higher authorities and needs to be increased. Regardless, all the partners shared the challenge to implement gender equality plans and acknowledged it as a common struggle. But what is gender equality?

When asked the question, the responses showed similarities and differences between the partners. For example, issues such as work-life balance, more women in STEM and higher positions, and the gender pay gap were often cited as challenges that regions face and need to overcome through gender equality work and gender mainstreaming. In other words, gender equality and gender equality work were often discussed in a language that is common in formal settings, organisations and policy documents. Most of the partners relied on the formal language and modes of articulating gender equality common in policy documents and connected to the EU strategy, limiting the scope of both the “gender problem” and “gender equality work” to such discourses (2020-2025). In other words, the understanding of gender equality among the partners was mostly shaped by official discourses and the responsibility of gender equality work placed within the domain of policy/governmental actorship.

However, a few partners included social and cultural issues in articulating their responses about what gender or gender equality is. These responses were coupled with concrete examples of everyday life struggles of themselves and their (female) colleagues such as the problematic gendered attitude among managers and colleagues towards working mothers.



## GENDER EQUALITY AND BODY COUNT

*We aim to measure the low proportion of female researchers in the R&D sector. There is a lack of past empirical experience in (x8) region. Thus, a quantitative and qualitative national survey is needed to assess the situation of women in general and the exact number of female staff in research infrastructures. Based on our assumption (based on data from other sectors) there are fewer female employees in innovation and we seek the qualitative explanation. (Partner 10)*

We realised from the received responses that gender equality was predominantly understood and described among the partners quantitatively, such as the number of women in tech and higher positions, or statistics on the gender pay gap. Such a quantitative approach to social change is referred to as the “body count” approach (Ahmed 2000). Gender equality efforts, or social change initiatives at large, tend to count the number of targeted bodies (male/female, people of colour, queer people, etc.) as tokens of change. Such data/numbers are often mistakenly taken as indicators of the desired change (more bodies, higher number and hence a more successful change) and are mobilised as success stories. While facilitating conditions for hiring diverse individuals is indeed an important step towards social change such as increased gender equality, the body count approach is criticised for fixing symptoms rather than addressing the roots of the problem, here gender discrimination (Ahmed 2020). In other words, these tokenised bodies are added to a structure that is not formed to accommodate them, foster their needs, or empower them unless they successfully assimilate into the system (Ahmed 2020). As it was also presented in the response of many partners, great attention

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<sup>8</sup> Name of areas, regions, companies and other institutions/organizations that were mentioned by the partners are anonymized with an (x).

is placed on such numbers rather than the structural dimensions of gender equality work and sociocultural changes.

## GENDER EQUALITY AS A RADICAL FEMINIST MATTER

*Many of the decision-makers know feminism as a rather aggressive political movement (since about 1970/80), which focused very much on women's rights (which of course was very important for the development of the female role in society). In the meantime, however, the debate is not conducted only on the level of gender anymore but is rather about equality and inclusiveness in general. Very often, efforts to achieve more equality are still dismissed as 'something about women.' (Partner 2)*

Partners also mentioned that gender equality is sometimes mentioned and dismissed among people in higher positions in their respective companies/organisations as either a radical feminist idea or a "woman's issue" and hence not taken seriously. At best, this response would rather push the discourse from gender equality to inclusiveness in general which in effect can run the risk of degendering the struggle (undermining the gender issues under the disguise of diversity).

## GENDER BINARY

Gender equality was predominantly defined as equivalent to improvement for women rather than a societal multilayered gender issue. For example, we examined partners' awareness of intersectionality by using the spider web diagram and the Wheel of Privilege and Power to trigger discussions about other social elements such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality as constitutive parts of gender. The aim was, firstly, to inspire the partners to go beyond gender essentialism and the binary of men/women and to include other social elements; in other words, to be mindful of how multiple power relations intersect with one another and intensify experiences of gendered discrimination.

The second purpose was for the partners to identify which elements of an intersectionality-informed gender equality strategy/effort trigger discomfort, or which elements the partners believe cannot work within their context. For example, they were asked to mark on the spider diagram which social categories among gender, gender expression and identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, or ethnicity are less challenging societal elements for them to incorporate in their gender equality work. Through the results of the spider web diagram and the discussions among the partners, we found out that categories such as disability or age and ethnicity were thought to be easier to incorporate into gender equality work while sexual orientation, gender expression and religion were thought to be more difficult.

Overall, the exercises are meant to highlight gender as a social construct, intersectional and fluid, and also show how the inclusion of different aspects of intersectionality-informed gender equality work shapes the possibilities and limits of what can be achieved in terms of social change.

#### FROM GENDER BINARY TO INTERSECTIONALITY

To challenge the four dominant discourses of gender equality mentioned above (as a policy-inspired discourse, a body count approach, a radical feminist issue, and a binary concept), the Kau team planned to provide the partners with a series of lectures that not only address these struggles but also problematise the understanding of gender equality towards a more complex model in which the micro/meso/macro levels are discussed and complicated through the lens of intersectionality (as proposed in the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 mentioned earlier). To the majority of informants, intersectionality was a new concept.

*For example, in Rovaniemi (June 2023), the Kau team gave a lecture on “unconscious bias” and intersectionality as important concepts for gender equality work. The lecture*

*was combined with the screening of a TedTalk by Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>9</sup>, “intersectionality walk” also known as the “walk of privilege”<sup>10</sup> and group discussions and reflections. Partners found these exercises very eye-opening, and even used them in their stakeholder group meetings.*

*I was allowed to do the ‘privilege walk’ which was a real game changer as it really struck the attendees ... I shared the Ted-Talk about intersectionality with our HR person - she was devastated. (Partner 2)*

*We directly experienced the mechanism of cognitive biases and understood how important it is to work on this ... It is interesting to see gender equality not only from the point of view of social rights but also of economic benefits, innovation, and growth and above all from the perspective that diversity brings value. (Partner 1)*

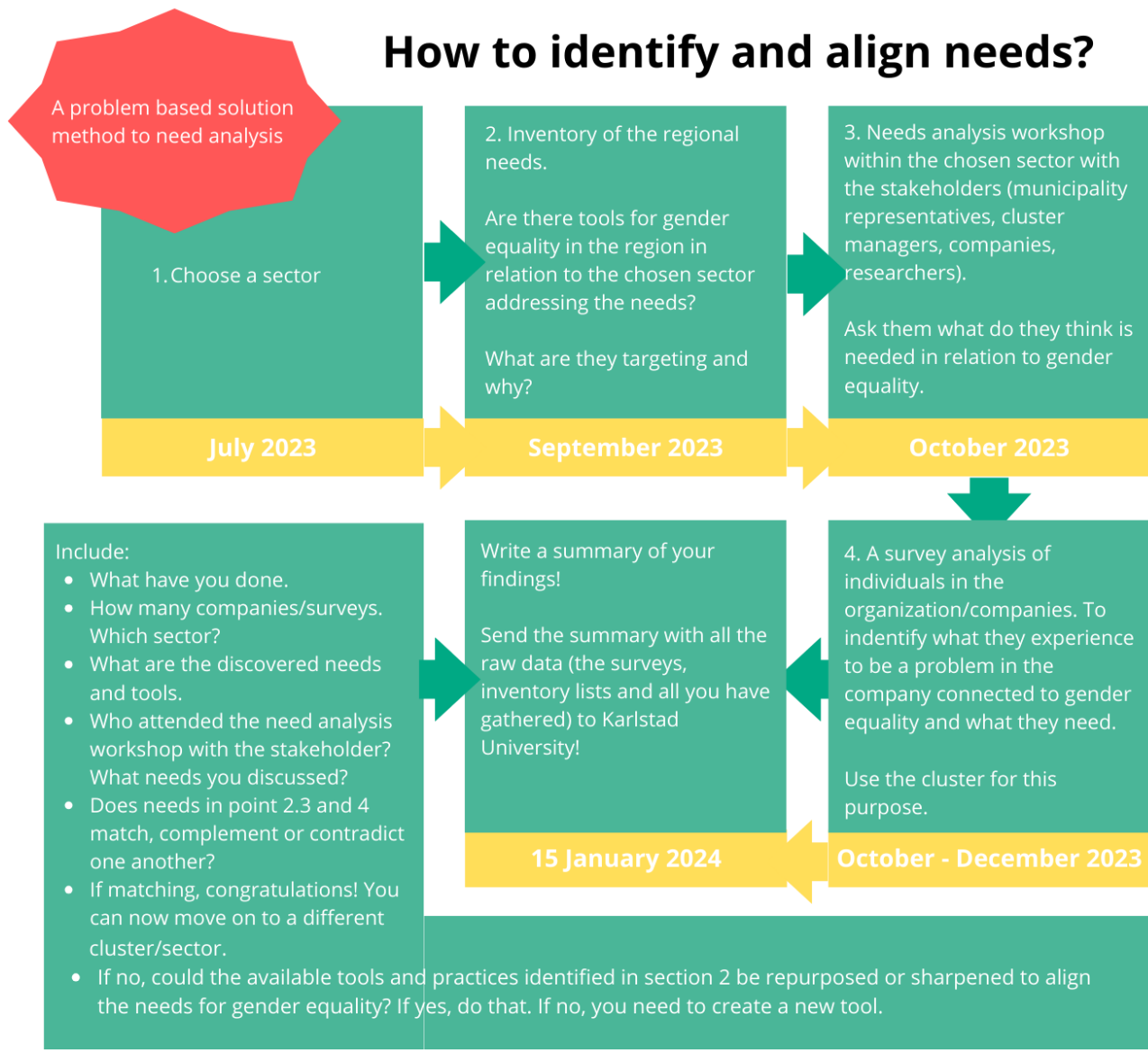
These efforts were meant to establish a common baseline among the partners and help them to challenge their perceptions of gender and gender equality work. The idea was to enable the partners to approach the question of gender equality differently, as something that is locally specific, intersectional, and multilayered. Lastly, it was also to prepare them for the needs analysis which we will explain later in this section.

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, The Urgency of Intersectionality TedTalk  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle\\_crenshaw\\_the\\_urgency\\_of\\_intersectionality?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en)

<sup>10</sup> The privilege walk is developed based on Peggy McIntosh’s concept of White Privilege. It is an exercise in which participants stand on a shared line, given certain personas. As the instructors read fictional situations, participants take a step forward or stand still. The exercise is meant to show how social positions create situations in which certain people go through life with less hindrance than others. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD5f8GuNuGQ>; see also chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.eiu.edu/eiu1111/Privilege%20Walk%20Exercise-%20Transfer%20Leadership%20Institute-%20Week%204.pdf

# NEEDS ANALYSIS AND DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS



Another approach of the Gender Academy project that we used for inspiration in DEBUTING was to do a localised multilayered needs analysis using “diagnostic tools” such as inventories of policies, surveys, interviews, and participatory observations to tailor solutions suitable for each company in its mission for gender equality. To do this, the GA also had to establish a multi-actor, multi-sector network to co-produce a gender transformative platform for gender equality in innovation in the region. As part of

DEBUTING, the partners had to work on creating a stakeholder group (a multi-actor platform for gender equality work in SMEs through their local context), which would provide them with the possibility of using similar diagnostic tools for situated needs analysis. The diagnostic tools would help them: 1- If not already familiar, to familiarise themselves with their local context. This would be done through an inventory of laws and policies nationally and in their region. As well as completing an inventory of tools, initiatives and strategies in the region that they can use, 2- to design a survey to evaluate the needs of individuals, among managers and employees at different companies; 3- to organise needs analysis workshops with the stakeholders and the network they have created around gender equality, in which they align needs among actors. These three “diagnostic tools” (inventory, survey, and workshop) can help start not only the gender transformation process on different levels but also the circulation of a gender equality discourse among different actors. Using the mentioned diagnostic tools further enables the partners to define the problem to which they would collectively tailor solutions.

*Debuting accelerated our understanding of gender equality in our region in terms of action, initiatives, and actors. (Partner 3)*

*We actively employed the problem-based method in our Needs Analysis Workshop with the stakeholders, identifying gender equality needs, responsibilities, and solutions. Additionally, the concept of intersectionality emerged prominently during the workshop discussions, particularly in the responsibilities and solutions steps. It became evident that addressing gender-based discrimination required educational initiatives, policy enhancements, and legal considerations, highlighting the interconnectedness of various social factors. (Partner 6)*

As the quotes show, two main layers are presented in the partners’ view of the suggested diagnostic tools. 1- Using the three diagnostic tools in the method creates a network of shared responsibility and sharing of resources that allows working with gender equality

on different levels. 2- Using the diagnostic tools not only changes the partners' perspective on gender equality but also that of the stakeholders as they read through, for example, the survey questions. It could be argued that the most important outcome here is knowledge production, knowledge sharing, and awareness raising about the gender equality challenges of the region as well as available networks, tools, initiatives, collaborators, and good examples.

## SURVEY

*The most challenging aspect in adapting the questionnaire was crafting the questions in a manner that retained the specialized terminology while also ensuring they were easily understood and accessible to a broader, non-specialist audience. Achieving that balance between maintaining technical accuracy and simplicity for wider comprehension proved to be the most demanding task throughout the adaptation process. (Partner 6)*

A sample survey was shared with the partners in the kickoff in April 2023 at Karlstad University. We asked them to decide on a sector, or several if they wish, within which they would like to address gender equality work as part of DEBUTING. Interestingly, some partners chose to work with one or two sectors while others chose a much larger number of sectors (the numbers varied between 1 sector to 12). A range of different sectors were also approached among the partners including but not limited to health innovation, agri-food, textile, computer manufacturing, wood industry, energy, recycling, and bioengineering.

After choosing the sectors, we asked the partners to readjust the survey to fit the challenges in these chosen sectors. This revision of the sample survey was then to be sent to the Kau team by December 2023. The logic behind asking the partners to redesign the sample survey was for them to engage with gender equality as a sector-based matter and reflect on how certain questions could/should be asked or are not possible to address in

certain contexts, as well as how such potentials and limits affect gender equality work. The sample survey that the Kau team provided was extremely detailed and extensive for the following reasons: 1- To provide the partners with many questions on gender equality through the lens of intersectionality and gender transformative approach from which they could take their picks to revise a simpler version tailored to their needs. 2- Reading and redesigning the survey was meant to trigger the partners' curiosity and help them understand what working with gender equality through the lens of intersectionality means by engaging with the questions.

The survey could have been used by the partners in practice and not only as an exercise, should they choose to distribute it for data collection about gender equality in companies (managers or employees). However, within the scope of DEBUTING, what the partners were expected to deliver was merely the redesigned, localised version of the survey (whether they would use it or not). A few of the partners not only redesigned the survey but also used it to collect data while others opted only to do the assignment.

The exercise achieved its purpose, namely making partners reflect upon what gender equality means, and how to envision or formulate it when working in different sectors with different groups, as presented in the following sample quotes about the most challenging part of redesigning the survey.

*Trying to be concise - impossible! - and effective in gathering information and needs by asking questions most correctly, both in terms of understanding and semantics and being "politically" correct. Mainly in the part related to policy and the institutional role. All this keeping in mind that the target was mainly enterprises who usually have little time and most do not have a culture of gender equality (Partner 1)*

*To ask the right question in order to receive relevant answers (Partner 5)*

*To pose a question is a very tricky thing without getting one own's bias in it (Partner 2)*



*To try to include as many questions to get a lot of information without making the survey too long. and to give options in the questions to facilitate responses while at the same time try to collect more open-ended information (Partner 4)*

In other words, most of the partners addressed the difficulties of not only finding the “right” questions or the “correct way” of addressing certain questions but also how to formulate the right options for answers that are not confusing or leading the respondents. It was also mentioned that formulating the questions was a difficult task because the partners did not want to make the companies feel alarmed, nor make them feel that they are being interrogated or under scrutiny, should they use a problematic formulation of certain questions. Partners needed to formulate questions in a way so as to maintain a good relationship with the company. A good relationship would be crucial to them not only for the survey distribution and data collection (should the partners decide to do it) but also for potential future collaborations. Another aspect of such difficulties mentioned was how to formulate the questions to inspire the respondents and make them see value in answering them.

Once the survey redesign was done, encouraged by the Kau team, a few of the partners decided to go ahead and use their survey for data collection in companies and then used the result for their regional needs analysis. As mentioned earlier, partners distributed or aimed to distribute the survey to companies in different sectors. Some sent the surveys to the managerial levels, some to the employees, and some to both. The reasons were described by two major logics. Some partners discussed the importance of managers and their attitude as the most important part of gender equality work in companies, maybe even the starting point for change. Others described all three layers of managers, middle managers, and employees as equally important to be included in the discussions about gender equality and organisational change. The differences were often due to the size of a company as the former approach was discussed as more suitable for smaller companies where distinctions of roles are not as clear as in bigger companies. Another

reason mentioned was practical matters. For example, including the employees may trigger discomfort on the managerial level giving impressions of being scrutinised. Hence partners thought it to be strategic to start with the managers and build trust with them before moving on to others within the company. Other practical matters mentioned were the lack of resources to invest in the time-consuming task of spreading, collecting, and analysing surveys. Hence keeping the numbers small by only including the managers would have made the task doable. Others had concerns regarding privacy issues and voluntariness of participation. A few had difficulties contacting companies and hence decided to share the survey anonymously on their website, raising questions about authenticity.

Nonetheless, partners who decided to use the survey mentioned that they found it a useful diagnostic tool. A few mentioned that they would like to repeat the survey after a period of two or three years to measure potential changes from the initial survey round.

*The survey can indeed serve as a valuable tool in advancing gender equality within SMEs. It offers companies an opportunity to assess the internal gender equality landscape, gauging employees' perceptions, and consequently enables the undertaking of new internal policies or actions geared towards enhancing the internal climate from a gender perspective. Furthermore, the survey acts as a diagnostic tool, identifying the internal relational culture within companies, the balance between employees' personal and professional lives, and the intersectionality between gender and other social characteristics of the employees. The data collected has the potential to comprehensively characterize the internal climate, the perception of gender equality, as well as shedding light on areas that require improvement. (Partner 6)*

Others decided against using the survey within the given time frame and postponed it to a later time. One of the partners wanted to add an exploratory round of interviews with certain actors within the sector they were working with before finalising the survey. They

wanted to ensure that the design of the questions was understandable/approachable and relevant to the sector. Another partner decided to co-design the survey with another city in the region to ensure the useability of the survey at a large scale and the cross-examination of the results. Both approaches needed more time than the scope of DEBUTING allowed.

Some partners hired a gender equality consultancy company to work with the design and distribution of the surveys. Others decided to drop it entirely and replace it with other solutions such as intensive workshops or face-to-face interviews.

*(One of the challenges was) limited resources - we could only include a small part of things we wanted to do ... I also think conducting the survey face to face would be better as many of the concepts are not familiar to the public and therefore some of them would need to be explained. In an online survey people easily skip the questions or the whole survey if it's complicated. They are not familiar with the concepts. (Partner 9)*

The quote, while reiterating the rhetorical difficulty of formulating questions mentioned earlier, suggests an alternative. That is the adaptation of the written survey into a face-to-face interview in which the interviewer can act as an interpreter and support the respondents.

Others mentioned that they decided to drop the interviews and survey and instead do collaborative workshops on gender issues:

*We did decide against using the survey during the x workshop. Instead, we managed the workshop set up as a focus group and talked openly about gender inequality and gender mainstreaming within the SMEs (Partner 2)*

Nonetheless, the partner delivered the redesign of their localised survey which has been shared on the digital project platform as inspiration and a resource which partners can

return to in the future should they decide to do so. To put the survey within the theoretical discussion we had earlier, the survey has the potential to act as a diagnostic tool at the microlevel of the needs analysis process. By asking questions about the personal experiences of managers and employees regarding their everyday experience of working in a company, the survey provides information about needs and necessary changes in the company culture towards a better, gender-equal, and more diverse work environment.

## INVENTORY

In the project kickoff meeting in Karlstad, interesting discussions started when the Kau team presented the sample survey. As partners read through the sample survey, they voiced questions such as whether legal frameworks of different countries facilitate or prevent asking questions about sexual harassment, gender violence, or other forms of discrimination. Some participants expressed an unease about asking certain questions or working with certain gender equality criteria not knowing whether it is legal or whether asking certain questions implies taking certain forms of legal responsibility. For example, if they include a question about sexual harassment in their survey, would that bind them legally to report to the police if a person answers yes to having experienced harassment in the company? This triggered a discussion about the importance of knowing the context within the group. Some of the partners expressed an interest in researching their legal context and learning about other countries within DEBUTING and how they frame gender equality matters legally for more inspiration. To enable this, the Kau team asked the partners to complete an inventory of legal frames for gender equality in general and the regional policies for gender equality specifically.

Doing an inventory contributes to the project in three ways. Firstly, it provides a compass for the partners to evaluate and plan their gender equality work realistically within the

national and regional frameworks. For example, partners presented different findings such as:

*We have taken stock of the situation. However, there is no written equality policy in x Region. Rather, it is a combination of various funded initiatives and measures.*  
(Partner 8)

Other partners realised that even though there are policies and laws in place, they still do not deliver the expected result, showing them that other measures are needed to achieve gender equality. For example,

*Equality plans are often done because they are mandatory and not a part of the strategy of the company. Everything is regulated by law but the reality is not like that. There is still a lot to be done in terms of co-responsibility. Equal pay for equal work but there are more men in some jobs because they are not the ones who take care of the family or because they work better paid shifts.* (Partner 4)

*At the national level, we have laws for SMEs which need to be disseminated to the companies. The majority do not apply them nowadays.* (Partner 3)

Secondly, it provides partners with a comprehensive overview that could guide their policy suggestions by the end of DEBUTING, which is one of the project goals. For example:

*Equality Certification - reference practice/guidelines that can measure the effectiveness of the actions undertaken by the organization towards a work environment inclusive of diversity and capable of guiding the change of policies for gender equality of companies is important. It is crucial to encourage companies both to work on gender equality and to verify their contexts and areas for improvement. It offers a system of indicators for self-assessment that helps to work on weaknesses.*

*Certification guarantees tax benefits. It is a reference practice and not a mandatory rule, perhaps it will become one, however, being mandatory would give a further boost. Moreover, ... we and the Region are working on sets of indicators present in the tenders to support the implementation of the ERDF/EDF+ 2021-2027 Funds. However, it is not yet clear how the indicators, and which are the most appropriate, can be used both in the evaluation of the quality of the proposals and in the measurement of the impact and verification of correct implementation, to also have a more precise picture of the policy interventions to be made. (Partner 1)*

Thirdly, the inventory can be used to situate gender equality plans and initiatives in relation to other strategies and plans that could support each other. As one of the partners argued:

*We are currently focusing on developing an idea together with the stakeholder as to which the two sides, 'cluster initiatives' and 'equality measures' can benefit from each other, as there has been no cooperation in this area to date. (Partner 8)*

Aside from these three achievements, the results of all inventories were shared on the common digital project forum where partners could look through each other's inventories for inspiration and future exchange of knowledge. The inventory is a diagnostic tool at the macrolevel in which one can identify how discourses such as law and policies shape possibilities and limits of what gender equality and diversity mean and what kinds of initiatives and practices can be planned. The inventory also sheds light on what gender equality strategies are stressed over others, helping to balance gender mainstreaming practices towards a more holistic approach.

## MULTI-SECTOR WORKSHOPS

*To increase the awareness and capacity of policymakers and clusters to address gender equality in the industry as a critical factor for SMEs to grow and to become more competitive. (Partner 7)*

As mentioned earlier, DEBUTING takes on a co-creation strategy for gender equality work and innovation through clusters. A crucial point is to define problems at hand and create solutions collaboratively among the involved actors on different levels, namely the regional actors, cluster managers, company representatives and even researchers. The idea is not only that such workshops can provide access to the meso level of data production, but also that they can create an ongoing platform that helps different actors share resources, align needs and keep gender equality as an ongoing process. These workshops, through implementing co-creation strategies, foster the capacity for social innovation alongside technoscientific and business innovation.

Some of the partners found the process of assembling and organising such workshops difficult for different reasons. For example, the size of clusters or lack of enthusiasm or conviction regarding participation was mentioned by a few partners.

*They are not as participative as we would have liked. The cluster is small and not widely available. But we are involving business associations representing the enterprise sector ... I have discovered that there are a lot of tools and yet the data is bad. (Partner 4)*

*Companies are not necessarily aware of the initiatives and offers. (Partner 9)*

The workshops also provided a platform in which partners learned about many available tools and resources for gender equality work that already exist with which regional actors/organizations and companies already using. Therefore, few of the partners discovered that the low statistics on gender equality in STEM and SMEs are not due to a

lack of tools and techniques for working with gender equality, since many already exist. They discussed whether a new approach to gender equality is needed that tackles social change in more innovative ways, for example, in terms of new policies.

*The next step should include a collaborative approach for adopting or drafting new policies, together with the public and private spheres. There is a need to take better action/measures to address unstable work-life balances, and to encourage employees to be more open towards addressing gender equality issues. (Partner 1)*

*We are currently focusing on developing an idea together with the stakeholders as to which measures the two sides 'cluster initiatives' and 'equality measures' can benefit from each other as there has been no cooperation in this area to date. (Partner 8)*

In fact, some of the partners found such collaborative workshops to be the best option for promoting, educating and collaborating towards gender equality goals.

*We decided against using the survey during the x workshop as we did manage this workshop set-up as a focus group and also worked together and openly talked about gender inequality and gender mainstreaming within the SMEs which was more valuable for us and the attendees. (Partner 2)*

Others decide to skip or incorporate the workshops into other activities:

*We did not organise a specific needs analysis workshop with the stakeholders but during the 3 project meetings with the stakeholders, we dedicated space to understanding the current situation and investigating the needs. We left the clusters free to organise moments with their associate companies. Apart from the new cluster x which did a presentation for DEBUTING and participated in the survey, because despite their interest they are still too young for upcoming structured actions. A few of*



*the bigger clusters have the intention to organise a joint workshop in the next months.*

(Partner 1)

The diversity of the experiences and approaches among the partners prove the innovative and creative nature of such collaborative workshops while being very tailored towards local possibilities, resources and needs, hence harbouring the potential for longer-lasting effects for change since different actors will be aligned towards the goals as well as see their interest represented in them.

## SUMMING UP SECTION 1

In this section, we describe the process of preparing the partners for doing a localised needs analysis through two steps of baselining the partners' knowledge through lectures about an intersectionality-informed gender transformative approach. In other words, the Kau team tried to challenge the four dominant discourses of gender equality among the partners which came through in the kickoff discussions, namely gender equality as a policy-inspired discourse, a body count approach, a radical feminist issue, and gender as a binary concept. Instead the Kau team encouraged them to think along the lines of intersectionality and the complexities of gender equality work. Such a knowledge exchange was also meant to prepare the partners to do a multi-layer, multi-sectorial needs analysis that covers the macro, miso, and micro levels of mapping gender equality problems and needs. For this, the Kau team also provided the partners with a set of diagnostic tools such as surveys, inventories, and needs analysis co-production workshops. As previous studies show, such interactive collaboration proved the importance of context in thinking, strategising and working with gender equality measures as all the diagnostic tools were modified to meet the specificities of each context. For example, the survey sample changed into a different version once the partners were finished redesigning it, taking into consideration the cultural, social, sectoral, economic and political possibilities the partners had at their disposal. In the next

section of this report, we will reflect on the results of going through this process, including data collection and practices of doing gender equality work among the partners based on their own self-evaluation.



## SECTION 2: THE RESULT

# EVALUATING PARTNERS' FINDINGS THROUGH A QUESTIONNAIRE

In November 2023 we created and circulated an online questionnaire to the partners (attachment 1). The questionnaire was composed of qualitative questions in which partners would present the results of their needs analysis and the activities they did following the steps described in Section 1. The questionnaire also asked for information about what policy they are targeting and what gender equality challenges they want to address during the rest of the project based on their findings. They were also asked to reflect on the alignment between the three levels of micro/meso/macro analysis where they used the diagnostic tools (mentioned in the previous section). After collecting the completed questionnaires from the partners in February 2024, the Kau team analysed the partners' responses to 1) reflect upon changes in their approach to gender equality work, and 2) identify correlations between the identified needs among the partners to suggest potential themes for the focus groups in DEBUTING which start in semester 3. In what follows we present the results of the mentioned inquiries and the potential themes for the focus groups based on the findings.<sup>11</sup>

## CODING AND THEMATISING THE FINDINGS

We started to code the questionnaire responses by marking the most repeated words and similar concepts/synonyms and colour-coding them. The concepts were decided according to gender equality keywords, such as pay gap, gender mainstreaming, gender

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<sup>11</sup> We asked the partners to present their preliminary results in January when visiting Stuttgart in Baden-Württemberg followed by a joint discussion and Q&A among the partners. This was before the written joint analysis by the Kau team was done and distributed, showing many achievements which are also presented in the following.

budgeting, harassment, gender balance, talent attraction, culture and organisation, gender equality monitoring, competence development, equality plan, women's network, training, vocational training, STEM, equality index, equal pay, and gender awareness. The coded material then was thematised into categories which we introduce below. The aim was to discover prominent themes, hence to be shared with the partners as the themes for focus groups. The clustering of the codes in themes is presented in the following.

## DATA ON GENDER

Most of the partners mentioned issues connected to the lack of data and statistics within the context of gender equality and innovation. For example, gender-related statistics for different positions and different sectors are needed. A directory for gender-based payroll is also needed. However, it was not only data about gender matters that was missing but also quantitative data about the potential benefits of gender equality and diversity for business. Hence, one potential focus group can be about exchanging practices and good examples of how to organise ongoing data collection not only regionally but also nationally on such matters, which can help identify the problems but also provide evidence when needed.

## VALUE CREATION

One of the most mentioned issues with gender equality in SMEs was to create, advertise and prove the economic value for the companies of working with gender equality. It was mentioned that companies often resist or reject change towards equality and diversity because they cannot see the direct economic value of it. This problem could be partly addressed through data collection and evidence for economic growth among companies that have a gender equality policy, which is already included in the previously suggested theme Data on Gender. However, another dimension that was evident in the responses goes beyond presenting the already existing examples and data towards actively "creating value" for companies in implementing gender equality measures. For example,

partners mentioned goals for creating reward systems for gender-equal companies, including incentives such as certificates, potential tax benefits/reductions, funding criteria, and even obligatory quotas that create some elements of immediate economic gain for companies and inspire them to work more actively towards gender equality as we explain below.

*Monitoring/indicators & measures/prizes* - Many partners were reflecting on the importance of monitoring and evaluation of the performance of companies concerning gender equality. Such monitoring practices can provide an inventory of good practices but also a documentation of change in companies and contribute to their attractiveness. It was also mentioned that providing certain rewards, such as certificates or tax reductions, could encourage companies to engage with gender mainstreaming more seriously. How to create relevant indicators and regulate processes and practices of gender equality monitoring and what reward systems could be developed to support it could be another topic for focus groups.

*Mandatory Measures* - Partners in different ways mentioned the potential benefits of having mandatory measures in place to put extra pressure on the companies. For example,

*What it would take, in my opinion, is significant (painful, costly, ...) CONSEQUENCES for companies not complying to gender equality rules so gender equal treatment is enforced, which it is not at the moment. (Partner 2)*

Others thought differently:

*With regard to equality plans, they are carried out because they are compulsory. However, companies need to come to a point where they implement them not because they are compulsory but because they are committed, and they integrate it into their business strategy. (Partner 4)*

It could be argued that both comments are correct. Both approaches are needed in combination for gender equality work depending on the context. A top-down mandate to push the companies and a bottom-up cultural change in the organisation are needed for the change to become integrated and lasting, which brings us to the next step. Either way, legal and regulatory initiatives including gender quotas and gender/diversity requirements for regional project funds were mentioned several times, making this another potential theme for a focus group.

## MOBILISING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Partners raised the issue that they struggle with communication between different regional actors, official representatives and companies in relation to what needs to be done in terms of gender equality as well as what resources or initiatives are available for companies to use. As such, they were eager to discuss how to make such collaborative networking and communication mobilised for capacity building.

*Currently, the priority criteria on... influencing the adoption of measures, such as support and contributions for training, drafting gender equality plans and starting certification paths in companies. (Partner 1)*

*From the point of view of government-funded initiatives, the (x) initiatives are probably the most relevant for SMEs, as they offer advice to companies on equality and work environment... As the project progresses, we are working to make the cluster initiatives more aware of the services offered by the national gender equality initiatives, so that these services are used more by businesses. (Partner 9)*

Another capacity-building issue that was often mentioned, especially in relation to start-ups and smaller or family-based businesses, was the lack of resources to invest in change for a more equal company culture. Suggestions such as creating responsible digital and in-person networks and resources were discussed. Better systems of information sharing

and creating an “ecosystem of solution providers” was another suggestion to support the companies and their capacity building. The creation of sectoral and regional forums for gender equality practices was yet another suggestion. While such suggestions were mentioned, “how to implement them” is another potential theme for the partners to work with in focus groups.

## CULTURAL CHANGE

Whether at the company/organisation level or the societal level, cultural challenges and issues were addressed at large. For example, many partners mentioned awareness raising about equality, enabling work-life balance, attitudes towards (shared) parenthood, gender pay gap, gender stereotypes, willingness towards change, and getting men (and sometimes women) on board are a few of the challenges that could be situated under the umbrella of cultural change.

For example, partners argued that companies do not see gender equality as relevant and do not see it as necessary to change the company culture:

*Gender mainstreaming is not looked upon as an important priority but more like, ‘so, what’s in it for me if I go the extra mile?’ (Partner 2)*

*They do not see that promoting equality benefits the company/ they do not see it as an important matter. (Partner 9)*

In certain contexts that are more gender aware, there might be an interpretation of gender equality initiatives as something that has been dealt with in the past and is not needed anymore:

*Thinking that we have already come so far in gender equality, so there is no need to continue working with gender equality ... it is also a generational issue - older people have prejudices more often than younger people. (Partner 9)*



*Beliefs about gender run deep and even though progress can be made through laws and structural changes, there is often a pushback following times of major change. It is also common for everyone (men and women) to ignore other areas of gender equality when there is progress, such as better representation of women in leadership.*  
(Partner 7)

Either way, the often-mentioned cultural needs and challenges of achieving gender equality in companies offer cultural change as another relevant topic for a focus group. How to navigate negative associations and resistance is key here, which brings us to the next theme.

## DE-GENDERING OCCUPATIONS

The previous approaches often remain within the more conventional modes of gender equality work aimed at empowering women in male-dominated sectors, which could be argued to in effect make gender equality work into a “woman’s issue”. For example, when talking about capacity building, partners mentioned the need for the inclusion of women and young girls in male-dominated fields. Most of the partners already had many good examples of such empowerment programs and strategies, such as providing vocational training for women. Issues such as increasing the admission of young female candidates in STEM at colleges and universities or creating attractive programs for younger girls at different levels of school were also addressed. Creating extra-curricular tech-related programs for girls connecting to, for example, robotics and programming or camps or competition programs and mentoring young girls by female scientists were also suggested. At the same time, some of the partners mentioned similar suggestions for attracting more men to women-dominated careers such as nursing or teaching.

While such programs and strategies are crucial and extremely important in gender equality work, they often have a saturation point which was also mentioned in the introduction of this report. Moreover, as mentioned in section 1, the “adding/counting

bodies” approach would not necessarily address the roots of the gender problems but ease the symptoms at best. This saturation was also evident in partners’ responses, as many indicated that despite the mentioned initiatives, the numbers are not really improving. Even when women study STEM subjects or undergo occupational training for jobs that are marked masculine, many do not stay in those occupations. In other words, the solution may not be to add more bodies into the pre-existing system but instead to attempt to de-gender occupations and work cultures, as well as change the way that we approach gender equality work as a synonym of “women’s matters”. This becomes clear for example when a partner refers to an attitude towards motherhood.

*Integration of work into motherhood and not vice versa is a typical attitude. (Partner 2)*

*Flexibility in women’s employment is a must for ensuring their participation in a job market. Flexible work doesn’t just open doors for working parents, it’s an important driver for accessibility and equity for all underrepresented segments of the workforce. It is possible to make remote work to work for people, without sacrificing human connection, team cohesion, or engagement. (Partner 7)*

As mentioned earlier, an intersectionality-driven approach to gender equality might be one way to start complicating gender equality discourse and practices as a “gender system” problem rather than a women’s problem. Moreover, other creative methods and modes of working with gender equality might also be beneficial to make companies as well as managers and employees understand how gender as a social system affects everyone at work and not only women. Starting such creative modes of doing gender equality work and de-gendering occupations could be yet another theme for the focus groups. In conclusion, de-gendering occupations could be a strategy in which partners can simultaneously work to provide initiatives and opportunities targeted to women while also disrupting the gender associations with certain occupations. This is about

trying to invest in expanding the notion of gender equality beyond the “woman’s issue” association and into targeting gender systems at large.

## REGIONAL STRATEGY CHANGE

Among the partners, several mentioned their plans for working towards regional strategy changes and policy changes. For example, changing the Regional Equality Plan towards more gender equality and less corporate profit was mentioned as well as drafting a gender equality policy at cluster levels. Some mentioned the goal of suggesting revisions of policies already in place based on their needs analysis and findings. For example, strengthening the action plans for equality and creating a model based on the best regional practices in companies were named. Others mentioned that they aim to re-evaluate and improve their policy instruments and equality plan/strategy (specifically concerning motivating women in STEM and providing infrastructures for supporting companies). Other areas of interest mentioned for policy/strategy change were increasing awareness of gender equality and reducing workplace gender bias. As mentioned in the introduction, continuous revision of the policies/strategies for social change is a vital part of gender equality work and since the need and drive for it have already been presented among the partners, we suggest regional strategy change as the final potential theme for the focus groups.

## SUM UP

As mentioned, the presented analysis was based on a questionnaire that was filled out by the partners after going through the steps mentioned in Section 1. Based on the responses, the Kau team did a thematic analysis of the material to cluster potential shared interests and struggles mentioned by the partners and suggest focus groups. One more issue that is worth mentioning is that the questionnaire asked about the experiences of the partners concerning the three diagnostic methods, survey, inventory and the needs analysis workshop. The aim was to make them reflect on the responses

they received and the data they collected with all three methods (or two if they skip one), if the sets of responses seemed to confirm or contradict one another. In most cases, while the majority of data correlated, they acknowledge that they have discovered new needs by doing the three levels of data collection together. Moreover, even when the data correlated, partners argued that different methods presented different angles to the same problems, hence enabling them to think about gender equality in different ways.

## CONCLUSIONS: SUGGESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS AND PEER REVIEW WORK

Now that we have explained the thematisation of the collected responses to the questionnaire by the partners, we wish to present the clustering of these themes into 4 final umbrella groups which correspond to the potential focus group themes. The focus groups aim to deepen the discussions among partners as they continue sharing experiences and knowledge that will support the work when dealing with policy change at the regional level and with cluster involvement. Further exchange of knowledge and experiences among partners, toward finding better solutions for shared struggles and potential policy improvements, will be supported by initiating these specific focus groups.

As outlined in the project plan for DEBUTING, the format will be two focus groups running in parallel sessions, organised as part of the program at the physical project meetings in semesters 3-6 of the project duration. This means that there will be at least eight sessions of work to be done within the format of “focus groups”. When held they will end with a joint reporting session, so all partners are informed about all topics discussed. The focus groups could also include peer review of suggestions made by partners to improve their policy instrument. The work within the focus group will be supported by the Kau team, and based on the engagement, initiatives, and needs raised by the partners, based on

the findings to build further on from the first two semesters of the project. All partners are encouraged to support the work within the focus groups, not from a specific expert role - even though all partners are welcome to invite experts on different topics from their networks and regional stakeholder groups - but as experiences that could be shared among partners, or needs that can be addressed together. The expectations for the work within the focus groups are that the partners will support each other and lead the work jointly. When a project partner would like to have comments and suggestions on their ongoing work to improve their policy instruments, all other partners and the Kau team are invited to share their experiences, references to further support/reading material, and possible insights on the topic raised.

The following four headings cover the main areas of interest and also include specific topics for discussion:

1. Monitoring and measuring (think about it also as a value creation practice)
  - Indicators
  - Measuring processes/practices
  - Prizes or certificates
  - Mandatory incentives (e.g. legal and regulatory initiatives, including gender quotas and gender/diversity aims for project, funding etc.
  - Gender budgeting
2. Regional strategy improvement
  - S3 to S4
  - Gender equality plan (including in the regional strategy)
3. Capacity building and organising for change
  - Data on gender issues, statistics and gender equality benefits
  - Networking
  - Inventory of tools for gender equality, initiative and continuous updating
  - STEM training for women
  - Vocational and women-oriented tech training

- Training for gender equality work and support for the companies
4. Gennovation and Gender labs (Re-thinking gender equality beyond the familiar for revolutionary strategy change)
- Getting men on board (Gender equality is not a women's issue but a gender issue)
  - Thinking awareness raising, work-life balance, parenthood, pay gap, willingness in new ways
  - Implementation of cultural change through unconventional exploratory methods (arts, hackathons, etc)
  - Gender equality needs interdisciplinary, inter-organisational collaboration, inter-actor collaboration

As has been shown during the first year of working within DEBUTING, ideas, thoughts and reflections around new findings are flowing and there is a need for an ongoing open discussion on what to focus on to make the best out of the time together during the project meetings. Therefore, starting with the focus groups collaboration among the partners creates a space to attempt problem-solving in one or as many areas as they wish to address.

As they continue working with gender equality in their region, they may discover new areas of challenge that they would like to target beside or along the line of the suggested themes. What complements their work presented in this report is also the sharing of good practices and inspiration from their policy improvement journey. Lastly, some of the partners will undergo staff exchanges organised by DEBUTING for them.

The learnings by the partners and the new findings based on the focus group work results (and the other activities within the project) will be summarised and presented through a second analysis made by the Kau team, in semester 6. From that coming second analysis and summary of findings, referring to experiences made by the partners when dealing

with their policy changes and supported by tools offered in DEBUTING, the ambition is to present at the end of the project a set of policy recommendations to be used for EU-wide dissemination.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The challenge we often face when trying to fulfil the key objectives in the EU Gender Equality Strategy is the lack of knowledge on how to address them in practice. The need for guidance on specific actions to take in order to reach the key objectives is confirmed and explained through the joint needs analysis made within the DEBUTING project. Two main conclusions are obvious, based on the findings detailed in the report:

1. The key to success lies in understanding the specific needs addressed in a given context. This involves going beyond the conventional way of understanding what the problem actually is. The partners confirm the value of the project's findings on how to increase gender equality in SMEs through a co-production method and gender transformative work involving their regional clusters. In line with this, the partners also testify to having gained knowledge and tools that will support their work within their specific context, based on their local needs analyses.
2. Even though there are differences between the 10 partners, representing the diversity of regional experiences across Europe, the joint needs analysis in the report shows the main common challenges, as summarized in the suggestions for the four focus groups. It is also clear that working together, bringing regions (and their stakeholders) together from different corners of Europe, brings new insights and inspiration to the work. Listening in on the comments given by the partners in the DEBUTING project, it is very encouraging to note that the work performed together has indeed increased both knowledge, motivation and courage to manage big steps towards the further realization of gender equality and inclusiveness for improved business development.

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# LIST OF ATTACHMENTS; 1.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Q2

1. Has your view on gender equality work changed since the start of the DEBUTING project? Please explain with a few examples.

Q3

2. Have you used any of the gender equality related theoretical concepts (e.g. intersectionality, problem-based method, invisible bias, etc.) and tools (e.g. the privilege walk, value exercise, etc.) that Karlstad University has provided during the DEBUTING? Can you explain how?

Q6

3. Have you done the inventory? If not, please explain why.

Q7

4. Please list the 2 to 3 gender equality policies from the inventory you did that are most relevant for gender equality work in SME:s in your region.

Q8

5. Please list what are the changes that you think are needed in the policy documents mentioned above (the listed 2 to 3 policies in question 4).

Q11

6. Have you designed your own version of the survey, inspired by the sample survey that Karlstad university shared with you? If not, please explain why.

Q13

7. What was the most challenging part of designing the survey?

Q14

8. Do you think the survey could be one useful tool for gender equality work with SMEs, especially in policy areas you wish to see change? Please explain your answer.

Q17

9. If there are other tools you use in your gender equality work, please feel free to list them in the following.

Q18

10. Have you already sent the survey to companies for data collection?  
If you already have, please explain what was the most challenging part in the data collection process?  
If not, please explain why and what was the hindrance.

Q20

11. How many companies in which sector have you approached? Which target groups within the company (e.g. management, employees, etc.)?

Q21

12. How many replies have you received or you expect to receive?

Q22

13. If you have received the responses from the survey participants, and have already processed them, please explain if the findings from the survey matches the regional priorities for gender equality work (e.g. policies, strategies, documents, etc.)?

Q23

14. In the previous section about the inventory (questions 4 & 5), we asked you to describe policies you see relevant and changes needed in them. Do the findings from the survey analysis confirm or contradict the mentioned priorities? Please explain.

Q28

15. If the findings from the survey match the priorities of the inventory, what would be the next step?

Q30

16. Have you been able to do the need analysis workshop with the stakeholders? If not, please explain why.

Q31

17. Which type of organizations/stakeholders were invited to the workshop (e.g. SMEs, clusters, regional office, municipality, etc.)? How many of the invitees showed up? How many participants in total attended?

Q32

18. Which needs in terms of gender equality work were discussed in the workshop?

Q33

19. Did the discussed needs align with the needs identified from the survey?

Q35

20. Did the needs identified and discussed in the workshop confirmed or contradicted the policy focus you discovered when doing the inventory? Please explain.

Q38

21. Do the needs discovered in the inventory (regional, municipality needs), the needs discussed in the need analysis workshop, and the needs presented in the survey results match? Please explain with few examples.

Q39

22. Based on your findings (inventory, survey, workshop), which topics among DEBUTING's thematic workshops would be a relevant focus point for you? Please choose 2 to 3 topics.

Q43

23. Are you already involving clusters or planning to include them in the next steps?

Q41

24. Please explain your own personal feelings and thoughts during this process? Moments of joy or difficulties?



Q42

25. Please include any thoughts you have which was not presented in the questionnaire.