

## Lifelong learning and Human Resources Skills Development in Greece

Anna Tsiboukli<sup>a</sup>, Thomas Babalis<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, [atsiboukli@primedu.uoa.gr](mailto:atsiboukli@primedu.uoa.gr)

<sup>b</sup>National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, [tbabalis@primedu.uoa.gr](mailto:tbabalis@primedu.uoa.gr)

### Abstract

Europe has been investing increasingly in Lifelong Learning in recent years, possibly due to the emergence of new challenges that include population mobility and aging, as well as the transformation of the labor market due to the 4th industrial revolution. The purpose of the current paper is to address the need to employ lifelong learning policies and strategies to ensure equal access for women to the workplace and leadership in order to achieve labor integration. This paper discusses the presenting problem on data provided by independent research organisations being either public or private entities. Investing in Lifelong Learning programs in the workplace in Greece, to ensure women's equal participation and transformation in leadership roles is also discussed in relation to segregation phenomena such as mobbing and sexual harassment. The present paper suggests that even though women may participate in Lifelong learning programmes, policies and strategies need to focus more on enhancing their soft and digital skills, in battling sexual harassment in the workplace and promoting equal access to leadership roles.

### Key words

Lifelong learning, adult education, women, employment, labor

### 1. Introduction

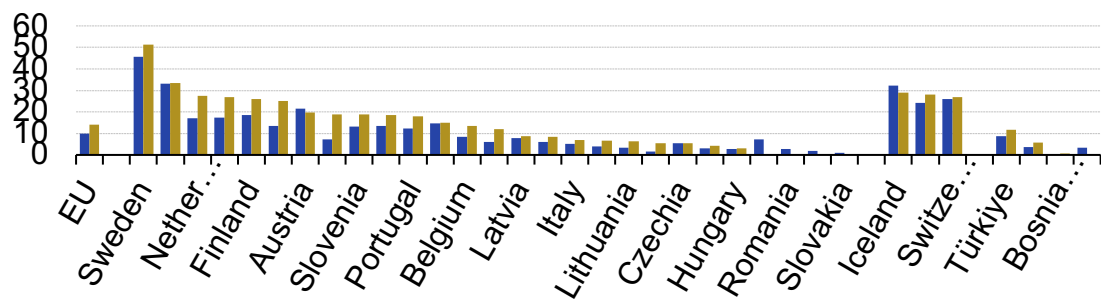
The current paper attempts a theoretical interpretation in relation to women's participation in lifelong learning programmes as a means for achieving equal access to the job market and leadership roles. The hypotheses are that even though women participate to the same if not greater extent than men in lifelong learning programmes, this does not necessarily imply that they have equal access to the labour market or leadership roles. The argument presented is based on large studies carried out by independent research bodies. The European Survey on Adult Education (Adult Education Survey) and Human Resources studies key indicators of participation in formal and non-formal education, training and informal learning and policy indicators regarding the participation of the adult population in Lifelong learning experiences (European Skills Index). Regarding the general population, the data clearly demonstrates that already employed highly educated younger people (aged 25-34 years old) make the most out of the opportunities presented through participation to Lifelong Learning programmes. On the contrary, people who are mostly in need for participation in Lifelong Learning programmes, for either reintegrating to the job market or sustaining their job, and those are namely older people of a lower educational level, make the least use of it (Eurostat, 2024).

### 2. Participation in Lifelong Learning Programmes in Greece

In the EU, participation in Lifelong Learning programs has risen by almost five percentage points in a decade, i.e. from 9.8% to 14.1%. The overall participation rates in Lifelong Learning

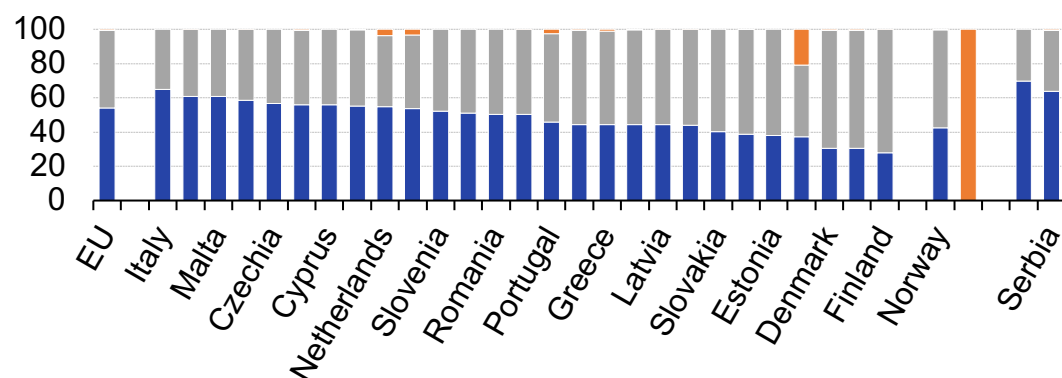
programs in Greece remains relatively low (Tsiboukli & Efstratoglou, 2022) when compared to EU countries or even third countries such as Turkey and Serbia. This is especially the case when considering the socially vulnerable groups of the population, such as the unemployed where participation to Lifelong learning programmes has risen only by 1% from, 3.1% to 4.2% (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Participation of the unemployed in Lifelong Learning (2013-2023) (Source: Eurostat)



Participation in non-formal job-related programmes in Greece amongst those who report participation is as high as 54,5% when in EU is 45,4% and in Finland 72% (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Participation in non-formal job-related learning programmes (Source: Eurostat, 2024)

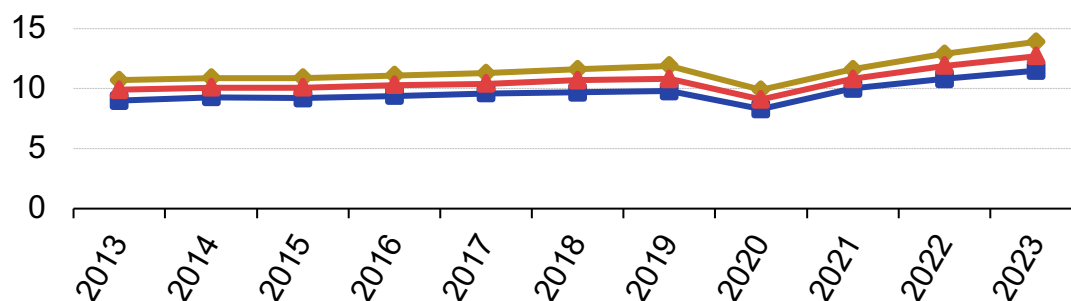


The above data suggests that in Greece participation in lifelong learning programmes remains relatively low especially amongst the unemployed. Participation is linked with job-related functions. A question remains what the participation rate is according to gender.

### 3. Participation in Lifelong Learning Programmes and Gender

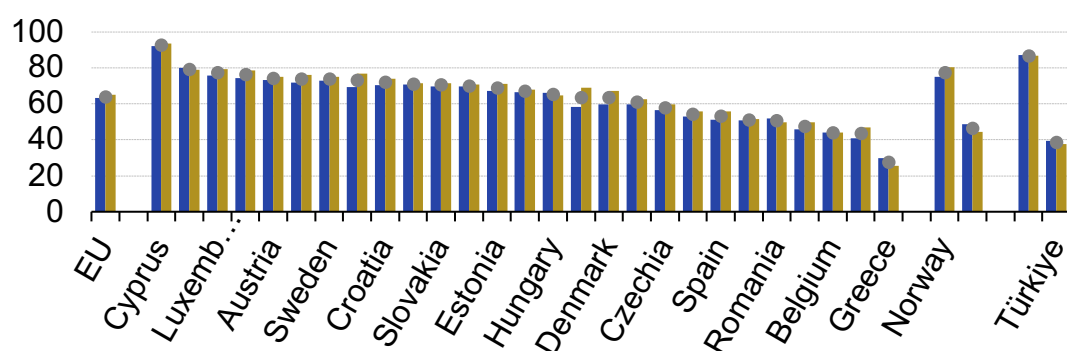
Women's participation in Lifelong learning programs, according to the European Adult Education Survey, appears relatively higher than that of men. The population of women presents an interesting case as their integration in the labor market has recently received increasing attention. Lifelong learning programs are used as important means for integration in the job market and/or empowerment for attaining leadership roles, either by focusing on female entrepreneurship or in other areas of work. Over time (2013-2023) the percentage of women (13.9%) participating in Lifelong learning programs is two percent higher than the corresponding percentage of men's participation (11.5%) (Table 3). However, the increased participation of women does not necessarily imply equal integration into the job market in Greece.

**Table 3:** Adult education and gender (2013-2023) (Source: Eurostat , 2024)



Furthermore, regarding gender differences participation of women (25.4%) in Lifelong learning programmes in Greece remains relatively low when compared to other EU countries (64.2%%).

**Table 4:** Participation in non-formal learning by gender (Source: Eurostat , 2024).



In Sweden, women's participation in Lifelong learning programmes is twenty times higher than in Greece, reaching 73.9%. When women's participation rates in lifelong learning

programmes in Greece are compared with those in third countries (non-EU), such as Turkey and Serbia, the data (18.8% and 24.2% respectively) shows clear evidence that in Greece participation rates are lower. Therefore, it becomes apparent that significant efforts need to be made at state level, from social partners, educational institutions and other organizations to increase women's participation in Lifelong Learning to reduce any gaps observed.

Other findings that are central to human resource development and the role of Lifelong Learning concern the development of digital skills and the role of women in technology related jobs. Specifically, 4 in 10 adults and one in 3 workers in Europe lack basic digital skills, even though at least 28 different occupational groups, from construction to health and IT, need both low- and high-skilled digital workers. Furthermore, women continue to be underrepresented in technology education and allied careers. Only one in six (6) IT specialists and one in three (3) STEM graduates are women ( Dicke et al., 2019).

According to the above data, the priorities of the European Skills Agenda include a) upgrading and strengthening the digital skills of human resources, b) matching personal goals with labor market opportunities and c) strengthening the integration of women, as well as young people not in education, employment and training ( NEETS ), in the workplace. However, even for women who are already integrated into the working environment, the data is not particularly optimistic, as shown by a recent McKinsey (2022) study on the equal inclusion of women in the workplace, which involved 750 companies and 250,000 employees in the period 2020-2021 and 423 organizations and 65,000 employees from companies with approximately 12 million employees in the reference year 2022. The study, which was also based on interviews with women of different identities (e.g. race, LGBTQI+, various forms of disability (McKinsey & Company , 2022), showed that the equal inclusion of women is slow. The delay is due to the fact that while 47% of the total working population are women, only 24% of them hold key positions in the leadership of organizations with the glass ceiling phenomenon still existing (Bechtoldt et al., 2019; Martin, 2019).

In this context, a key pillar for achieving women's integration into the workforce is the increase in their digital skills. The same seems to be true for socially vulnerable groups. With the aim of at least 78% of adults aged 20-64 years old working by 2030, emphasis has been placed on the participation of at least 60% of adults in a Lifelong Learning program for the same period. The acquisition of basic digital skills is considered essential for 80% of the adult population, as is the integration of 20 million people, including women, as experts in new technologies. Through this process, it is expected that, among other things, the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion will be significantly reduced by at least 15 million, of whom 5 million will be children. However, achieving both work integration and retention and advancement in the work environment through Lifelong Learning requires, among other things, the cultivation of social skills in which the workplace has begun to invest in the last decade (Harvey, 2010; Suarta et al ., 2017).

#### **4. Social Skills, Lifelong Learning, and the Workplace**

Digital and social skills are currently considered necessary for integration into the working environment (Tsiboukli & Babalis, 2022). However, there is often a "gap" between the knowledge and skills acquired within the framework of the formal education system and those ultimately sought by the workplace. This "gap" can potentially be bridged, with synergies and equal collaborations between education, training, employment and social partners. However, the workplace also needs to invest in In-company education and training programs that focus on the integration of new employees into the working environment as well as in continuous vocational education and training programs for existing employees. In this way, the

acquisition of new skills (re – skilling) and the upgrading of existing skills (up – skilling) of human resources will be ensured, to the extent possible, at least with regard to digital skills or the so-called hard skills. The case of social skills is different .

Social skills are often confused with elements of each individual's personality, such as extroversion, conscientiousness, willingness to cooperate and acquire new experiences in the work environment (Babalís & Tsiboukli , 2024). Their measurement is based either on the observation of human behavior (Lundberg , 2017) or on self-administered questionnaires, from which it is difficult to draw safe conclusions. Modern studies show that social skills are increasingly rare in the workplace (Schislyaeva & Saychenko, 2022) despite being considered essential for integration and retention in the work environment (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Possibly, there are certain industrial sectors (e.g. energy) where social skills may not be considered particularly essential (Lyu & Liu, 2021). However, there are other work sectors (e.g. tourism, education, health) that expect employees to have mastered a level of social skills, such as empathy, communication, but also the willingness and flexibility for teamwork, conflict avoidance and participation in solving work problems (Belchior-Rocha et al., 2022; Heller & Kessler, 2022; Oizi, 2020).

Social skills are significant for improving work climate. The quality and productivity of work are not independent of a positive working environment, but their relationship is not easily measurable. Measuring the performance of social skills in the work environment is also difficult. Work stress, bullying, harassment and burnout contribute to a negative work climate and affect the quantity and quality of work (Dall'Ora et al., 2020; Zapf et al., 2020). Avoiding harassment in the workplace is associated with reduced stress and consequently increased employee and service recipient satisfaction as well as work quality and productivity. A recent study by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work for Greece, shows that both men (69%) but especially women (81%), regardless of age, consider bullying and harassment, which occurs within the work environment, to be a significant source of stress ( Hoel & Vartia , 2018). As significant as the consequences are for the individual in terms of loss of mental and/or physical health and/or work itself, they are equally significant for society, with the burden on the health and criminal justice system (police, courts, etc.) but also for the workplace itself.

A Deloitte study (2019) shows that short-term repeated absences, (e.g., emergency leave, sick leave, unpaid leave), which an individual resorts to in order to deal with the harassment problem alone, result in the loss of significant hours of work and productivity (36 hours/on average). They are also associated with the phenomenon of “*physical presence-mental absence*” (*presenteeism*) which leads to a decrease in productivity for an average of 2.4 weeks. The staff loss rates ( staff turnover ), whether they are victims or perpetrators or accomplices, due to resignations (2/3 of cases) or dismissals (1/3 of cases), they also have a significant cost for the workplace. The work environment needs to invest in the search and training of new staff who will perform in the long term, while at the same time it may lose staff with significant expertise. When such phenomena are present in the working environment reduction in productivity is observed. Productivity reduction affects mainly employers (70%) and state tax revenues (23% ) and result in the loss of income for some individuals (7%) ( Deloitte , 2019). Lifelong learning programmes can help to develop a positive work environment by promoting social skills, learning how to tackle mobbing at work, raising awareness on sexual harassment and suggesting stress relief activities.

Therefore, the formation of a new model of transformational leadership in the workplace that could respond both, to the demands of a modern organization and the formation of a positive work climate is required. The empowerment of human resources can occur in the work context through Lifelong Learning programs. The design of Lifelong Learning programs needs to match individual and work needs . Matching is necessary to achieve learning transferability

in the workplace. There are work environments whose culture of fragmentation and inertia prevents decision-making and in which the transfer of know-how and newly acquired learning is almost impossible or at least extremely time-consuming (Tsiboukli & Efstratoglou, 2017). The organizational matrix, job descriptions, and the operation of Human Resources Training and Skills Development Department that will not be limited to simple procedures but it will rather develop to implement targeted Lifelong Learning programs to strengthen human resources at the workplace is important.

Lifelong Learning programs need to be implemented to ensure equality at work and avoid discrimination (Intersectionality), i.e. the fair treatment of women in particular in the work environment. Organizations can only benefit from diverse perspectives that assist informed decision-making, and inclusion, i.e. the positive assessment of the contribution of each individual so that they feel mentally safe and encouraged to submit new proposals and ideas for intervention.

In-house education and training programs that focus on the integration of new employees, as well as on the continuous professional development for existing employees, need to focus beyond re – skilling and up – skilling on preventing phenomena such as harassment and bullying. Major challenges at the workplace concern mainly interpersonal skills rather than the nature of the work itself. Lifelong learning programs, based on action research and experiential learning groups, such as T-groups, are used since 1945 at Harwood Industry in the USA (Burnes, 2019, 2007, 2004; Burnes & Cooke, 2013; Zarifis & Tsiboukli, 2022) up to date from Stanford Business Graduate School, as basic training tools (Thorsteinson & Highhouse, 2020).

Lifelong learning programmes are significant in the workplace for cultivating social skills, participation in decision-making processes, for taking initiatives and assigning responsibilities, for increasing commitment and empathy at the workplace. Staff and leadership need to work together towards perspective transformation and the transformation of organizations into learning organizations. In this context work related mistakes will constitute learning and development opportunities, cooperation in groups will be promoted and individuals will be empowered in the creation of a common collective vision.

## **5. Conclusions**

Lifelong learning programmes are significant in the workplace. Their implementation requires a new contract between the person at work and an innovative workplace that considers modern legislation for the prevention and treatment of harassment, the elimination of bullying and stress and the equal development of all genders. The constant investment in in-house training programs, the ability to transfer know-how to the workplace and the transformation of Organizations into Learning Organizations (Watkins & Marsick, 2003) remains a requirement (Tsiboukli & Efstratoglou, 2024). In this context, where teams are encouraged to develop a creative way of thinking, cooperation is rewarded and leadership uses experiential learning strategies, the strengthening of human resources skills is possible. The benefits are multiple for both the individual and the work environment that wishes to increase its efficiency. However, increased participation in lifelong learning programmes in Greece, remains a requirement for both men and women. Especially for women, participation needs to be followed by an actual improvement in the work environment and the ability to reach leadership.

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