



# Stories of Women in the Workplace

Exploring the experiences of women in the labour market and trade unions

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## Overview

The Greek project 'Promotion and strengthening of women's participation in trade unions and their representation bodies' aims to promote and ensure the active participation of women workers in positions of responsibility at all levels and in all types of trade unions. The INE (Labour Institute) have delivered activities, which focus on the broader social education of women, in order for them to become key actors for the promotion of women's issues via the trade unions. Innovative approaches taken in this project include counselling services and information dissemination on labour issues for women.

Working with a group of women from in and around Athens who are involved in trade unions, we collated a range of personal stories about their own and other people's experiences within the workplace, and the impact that the services provided by the trade unions have had on their lives. In these stories they talk about specific support available (i.e. counselling), issues within the workplace (i.e. discrimination) and their ambitions for the future (i.e. career pathways).

## Wellbeing and the workplace

A number of the women's stories focus on wellbeing and how this relates to the workplace. [Eleni's](#) story is about her role as a career counsellor. She talks about her concerns for people who are trying to re-enter the job market. She tells the story of an immigrant who was fired from her role and how this incident impacted on the individual's mental health. Eleni feels that counselling can help people to "*see things differently*". Similarly, [Areti](#) recalls a story of her friend who decided to leave her studies to pursue a career ambition. However, this venture didn't go according to plan and it left her with symptoms of anxiety. Through accessing cognitive therapy sessions, seminars and counselling services, the friend is working her way through these issues. The general sentiment is that accessing counselling and similar support services in which people can discuss their issues with others is beneficial for women's overall wellbeing, and therefore could contribute to progressing their position and roles within the workplace. Parallels can be drawn between the perspective presented in these stories and the story of a [young woman](#) recovering from a severe mental health condition from Stories of Finding Work from Turku, Finland. In this story, the woman describes how attending a young person's meeting group has "*brought meaning to [her] life*" and that she is looking forward to getting her school results and moving into a work placement. In all of these instances 'talking' therapies have supported people on their route to wellbeing.

Approaching the topic of wellbeing from a different angle, Sofia talks about how peer support and encouragement from friends helped a woman she knows overcome issues she had developed from being raised in a troubled and abusive family environment. In this story, [Sofia](#) explains how whilst the woman was experiencing a negative period of mental health due to her past, her friends support her to publish poems that she had previously written. Upon winning awards for the poems and having her achievements acknowledged, the friend is now moving on with her life. What this demonstrates is the diversity of different types of therapy or cathartic experiences that can support people to be empowered. Such support enables people to work through the challenges that they are encountering in their lives.

## Overcoming challenges through positive thinking

Speaking about overcoming challenges related to work, [Popi](#) recalls how after struggling to secure permanent employment, she found a job placement advertisement in a local newspaper and applied. 20 years later Popi is still working for this company and this employment has enabled in her to complete her graduate and post-graduate studies. Her message from the story is to not give up hope and do not be stopped by “*obstacles, difficulties or disappointments*”. Congruently, [Eleni's](#) message from her story about career counselling is that positive thinking is key to supporting people to overcome difficulties.

In her role at work, [Anna](#) supports people who are experiencing problems within the workplace. She describes how she advocates having a positive attitude when handling problems such as disputes. For Anna, it is important to remember that there are “*beautiful things in life*” and to not always be focused on money or problems. Embracing a positive attitude towards challenges seems to be driving [Maria](#) onwards in her career plans. In her story, Maria describes how she has taken a risk in seeking a different career path than she originally intended and that goes against her family's expectations. However, although she was 34 she “*didn't give up hope*” and rather than sticking to what she was already good at, she thought she would try a new career in hairdressing that she “*will be better at*”. Similarly, [Christina](#) received some confidence-building support and then was able to find a role in which she feels more empowered and respected.

## Gender differences in the workplace?

A few of the snapshot stories told by these women focus on the topic of equality in the workplace. In [Maria's](#) story she explains how she thinks that gender discrimination in the workplace in Greece is a “*critical issue*”. Building on this point, [Eleni](#) describes how she feels that this inequality is

brought about because of differences in pay and access to opportunities “*especially in the private sector*”. However, one [woman](#) says how in her organisation there are no big issues between the genders and that emphasis is given to the skills that women tend to possess, such as creative thinking and creativity. This approach supports women to maximize their contribution to the organisation and be very productive. Another [woman](#) draws on her experience as a counsellor for abused women to say that it is easier for a woman to talk to another woman about her problems, as in general, women tend to face similar issues in the workplace and in balancing work and home life. The implication is that men do not face similar issues.

[Click here to view the extracts from these stories](#) and [click here to view the feature story](#).

## InnoSI Themes

A key theme that emerges from these stories is that the support available in order to progress women’s roles in the workplace is personalised. The **personalisation** of support can be a factor that enables people to take more control of their own lives, as is evidenced in [Maria’s](#) story in which she rejects family pressures and makes her own decisions about her future. Similarly, through receiving mentoring from a person tasked with promoting equality in the workplace, [Christina](#) is now in a new role where she feels more confident and is finding it easier to handle workplace problems.

The insight from these stories draws parallels between this project that aims to empower women in the workplace, and the ‘Youth Guarantee’ scheme in Sweden that seeks to include young people more in society through education and work. The stories gathered in relation to the ‘Youth Guarantee’ initiative also focus on the **range of choices support** provided through [educational workshops](#), support in [searching for work](#) and [rehabilitation](#) etc. Although the type of support provision offered is different, the stories suggest that the impact on people’s lives is similar. In essence, both programmes are reducing people’s exclusion and disadvantage relating to the labour markets and seem to have significant impact on these individuals’ **life course perspectives**.

## Summary of Insights

- Bespoke support:** The range of support available such as counselling, confidence-building, cognitive therapy etc. has provided choices for the women in these stories. Through providing options, people are then in a position to make a decision about what support would be best for them and thus the support becomes more meaningful.
- Empowerment:** Through this bespoke support, it is clear from these women’s stories that the various support and interventions they have accessed or received (either through formal structures or their peers), has empowered them to be the catalyst of change in their own lives.