

WOMANITYLEAP

Equipping youth workers to cultivate Multiple Intelligence competencies in young women for leadership and career readiness in the AI-dominated era



BRIDGING THE COMPETENCIES AND TALENTS OF YOUNG WOMEN AND THE DEMANDS OF THE JOB MARKET NATIONAL REPORT: BULGARIA

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CONTENTS

ABOUT THE PROJECT	2
ABOUT THE MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCE CONCEPT	3
INTRODUCTION OF THE CONDUCTED ACTIVITIES	4
NATIONAL CONTEXT	5
STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS INPUT	6
NATIONAL WORKGROUP SESSION INPUT	8
SUGGESTED CHANGES TO THE MI COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK BASED ON THE INPUT	9
CONSLUSIONS	12

WOMANITYLEAP IS BUILT AROUND ONE PRACTICAL MISSION: YOUTH WORKERS GET BETTER TOOLS TO RECOGNISE DIVERSE STRENGTHS, AND YOUNG WOMEN GET CLEARER, MORE CONFIDENT PATHWAYS FROM TALENT TO SKILLS TO OPPORTUNITIES.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

WomanityLEAP is a 24-month Erasmus+ project which supports youth workers to nurture every kind of talent based on an innovative Multiple Intelligence concept, and to help young women (16–29) grow into confident, capable leaders with real opportunities in a changing, AI-shaped world. It is ran by 6 partnering organizations located in Bulgaria, Belgium, Spain, Cyprus, Latvia & Serbia.

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ABOUT THE MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCE (MI) CONCEPT

Why Multiple Intelligences?

- AI and automation are reshaping jobs and skills requirements
- Human strengths become more valuable: creativity, judgment, empathy, collaboration, leadership
- Many young women still face barriers (confidence, stereotypes, access, and limited career exposure)
- Youth workers need a practical framework to recognise strengths fairly and translate them into opportunity

The traditional lens:

- Modern education has been heavily influenced by the IQ scale and narrow measures of “smart”
- This shaped testing, grading, and what society rewards
- Strengths that don’t fit IQ-style measurement often stayed invisible: creative, emotional, leadership and practical capabilities

The MI concept:

- MI reframes intelligence as multiple capacities, not one score
- Everyone has a unique profile of strengths that can be developed
- WomanityLEAP turns this into a youth work tool for guidance, confidence and career direction

THE QUESTION ISN’T IF I’M INTELLIGENT, BUT WHICH INTELLIGENCES I CAN GROW AND APPLY.

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INTRODUCTION OF THE CONDUCTED ACTIVITIES

The structured interviews and national workgroup sessions were conducted between January and February 2026 in Bulgaria.

A total of five structured interviews were conducted with four youth workers and one young woman, representing diverse profiles and professional backgrounds.

The interviewees work in different contexts with a variety of target groups, including:

- youth in institutional care and vulnerable environments with limited support systems
- youth young women from Roma communities experiencing educational and social barriers
- adolescents in urban educational settings with higher access to opportunities
- young women transitioning to independent adulthood

In addition, the interview with the young woman provides a first-hand perspective on the challenges and aspirations of youth in the AI-driven labour market.

All interviews aimed to explore the impact of AI and digitalisation, as well as to identify key structural and functional barriers and competencies relevant to young women's employability.

Two national workgroups were also conducted:

- one in person in Sofia (12.02.2026) with 7 experts
- one online (27.02.2025) with 3 experts

Both sessions followed a structured agenda, combining presentations and discussions to gather insights on the impact of AI on the labour market, the barriers faced by young women, as well as validation and further development of the MI competence framework.

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NATONAL CONTEXT

In the past years, the Bulgarian labour market has been relatively stable, with moderate unemployment levels. According to data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI), the unemployment rate remains low, around 3-5%, although youth unemployment is higher. However, gender inequalities persist. Women in Bulgaria earn, on average, approximately 13-15% less than men, with variations across sectors and regions. These differences are influenced by factors such as occupational segregation, concentration of women in lower-paid sectors, and career interruptions related to caregiving responsibilities.

Young women face a combination of barriers that affect their access to employment and career development. These include persistent gender stereotypes, unequal access to education and opportunities, lack of mentorship, etc. In addition, many struggle with self-confidence, uncertainty in career planning, and limited awareness of labour market expectations. These challenges are further reinforced by the mismatch between the education system and real labour market demands, which leads to insufficient preparation for employment and contributes to unrealistic expectations or a lack of direction.

The situation is particularly complex for vulnerable young women, including those in institutional care, rural areas, or minority communities. These groups face additional barriers like poverty, lack of stable support systems, early school dropout, early motherhood, and limited exposure to alternative life and career paths. Many of them operate within a “survival-oriented” mindset, focusing on immediate needs rather than long-term career planning, which significantly limits their opportunities for development.

In this context, the influence of AI risks deepening existing inequalities, as young women without access to digital skills, information, and support systems are less able to benefit from emerging labor market opportunities. Routine and low-skilled jobs are gradually declining and the labor market is becoming less forgiving towards individuals without qualifications or readiness to continuously develop their skills.

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STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS INPUT

The interviews revealed strong patterns across different target groups, highlighting both systemic challenges and competency gaps. One of the most prominent findings is the strong inequality between different groups of young women. There is a clear divide observed between:

- young women living in urban areas with access to education and opportunities
- young women in vulnerable contexts, such as institutional care, rural areas and/or minority communities

For example, in urban areas like the capital - Sofia, young women tend to struggle primarily with “self-confidence and uncertainty about career paths”. While, in contrast, young women in institutional care face more fundamental challenges like a lack of skills for “basic life planning” and “low expectations about their future”.

Key barriers

Across interviews, the most common barriers are interconnected and include:

- socio-economic disadvantages and poverty
- lack of support systems and long-term guidance
- early school dropout, limited access to education and early motherhood
- emotional instability and trauma
- limited awareness of career opportunities and labor market expectations

A recurring pattern is the presence of a “survival mindset”, particularly among vulnerable young women, where immediate needs take priority over building long-term career paths. This results in lack of career orientation, unrealistic expectations and limited ability to plan long-term.

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Underdeveloped competencies

The interviews highlight several common gaps:

- long-term planning
- emotional awareness and self-expression
- critical thinking and decision-making

Competencies needed for employability

The most critical competencies identified include:

- digital literacy
- communication skills
- emotional regulation and self-awareness
- resilience and adaptability
- decision-making and long-term thinking

Needs for support

Interviewees emphasised the need for:

- structured and accessible tools
- practical frameworks linking strengths to career paths
- long-term mentorship and support systems

The interview with the young woman provided a valuable insight into her experiences and personal challenges when transitioning into the labor market and independent adulthood.

Although she demonstrated strong relational and caregiving abilities, particularly in building trust and connecting with children, she struggled with identifying and expressing her own strengths, as well as making confident career choices.

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She is drawn to stable and meaningful professions, such as teaching and healthcare, which reflect her preference for human-centred roles. At the same time, her experience highlights several key challenges:

- uncertainty in understanding job conditions and employment contracts
- lack of knowledge about labor rights and administrative processes
- financial pressure related to independent living
- fear of making incorrect long-term career decisions

The interview also reveals the importance of emotional support, guidance, and access to clear and structured information. The young woman expressed a need for practical training focused on career orientation, financial literacy, and decision-making to support her transition from education to employment.

NATIONAL WORKGROUP SESSION INPUT

The workgroup sessions confirmed and expanded the findings from the structured interviews, providing a broader perspective on labor market changes and competency needs.

AI impact on the labor market

Participants highlighted that:

- AI is already widely used in recruitment processes (example CV screening)
- jobs in marketing, translation, and customer service are declining
- increasing demand for AI-related and tech roles

At the same time, human-centered competencies like critical thinking, adaptability, emotional intelligence and creativity are becoming increasingly important.

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Barriers and challenges

Main barriers identified include:

- lack of learning skills and consistency
- inadequate education systems
- mismatch between education and labor market
- cultural limitations in smaller communities
- lack of support systems
- mismatch between employer expectations and young people's preparation

Participants noted that young women often underestimate themselves or have unrealistic expectation and "limit themselves to what feels accessible and safe".

Competencies needed

Most important competencies were identified as:

- critical thinking
- adaptability
- emotional intelligence
- decision-making in complex situations

SUGGESTED CHANGES OVER THE MI COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK BASED ON THE INPUT

Based on the collected input, several improvements are recommended:

- more practical application - the framework should include real-life examples and clear links to labor market applications
- stronger emphasis on emotional intelligence and resilience - these competencies are essential for navigating uncertainty and overcoming barriers

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- expansion of digital and AI-related competencies - digital skills should also include critical thinking, ethical awareness, and ability to work with AI tools.
- simplification and usability - the framework must be engaging, accessible, structured, and easy to use in youth work contexts.
- stronger connection between competencies and real jobs - tools should help young women translate their strengths into concrete professional pathways.

The national workgroup sessions also suggested some refining of the three main intelligence domains.

Personal intelligence

All participants confirmed the relevance of the domains (interpersonal, emotional, cognitive, purpose-oriented), but identified some areas for strengthening:

- self-awareness and self-advocacy should be further emphasized, as young women often struggle to recognize and express their strengths
- emotional intelligence needs stronger focus on emotional regulation, assertiveness, and managing reactions in stressful or male-dominated environments
- cognitive competencies should include stronger emphasis on negotiation skills and interdisciplinary thinking, which are currently underdeveloped
- purpose-oriented intelligence should better address ambition and long-term goal setting, as many young women tend to limit their aspirations due to social expectations

Additionally, participants recommended adding resilience and adaptability as more explicit components within this domain as well as strengthening the link between personal competencies and their real-life application.

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Relational intelligence

The domains (interpersonal, cultural, persuasive & leadership, social-emotional) were seen as highly relevant, but some refinements were suggested:

- interpersonal vs social-emotional intelligence should be more clearly differentiated, particularly between one-to-one communication and group dynamics
- greater emphasis should be placed on assertiveness and leadership, as these are often discouraged in young women despite being critical for career development
- the cultural domain should be expanded to include awareness of systemic inequalities, power dynamics, and social context (suggested as “cultural & contextual intelligence”)

Participants also highlighted the need to strengthen:

- active listening and conflict resolution skills, which are currently underdeveloped
- ability to express opinions and take initiative, especially in professional environments

Applied intelligence

Participants considered the domains (creative, sensorimotor, naturalistic, technological & AI-interaction) relevant and future-oriented, but pointed at important gaps:

1. Technological & AI-interaction intelligence requires strengthening in:

- AI literacy
- confidence in using digital tools
- cybersecurity awareness

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2. Creative intelligence should better reflect:
- innovation and entrepreneurial thinking
- willingness to take risks, which is often limited among young women

3. Sensorimotor intelligence is undervalued and should be more explicitly recognized as relevant for employability

4. Naturalistic intelligence was seen as less clearly connected to employability and may require clearer definition or reframing

Participants additionally suggested:
- integrating ethical intelligence (especially related to technology and sustainability) either as a separate domain or across all domains
- emphasizing learning by doing, through experiential and practical activities

CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that young women in Bulgaria face complex and layered challenges when trying to navigate the labor market, especially in the context of AI-driven transformation.

AI and digitalization are simultaneously creating new opportunities and deepening existing inequalities. While digital sectors are expanding, young women without access to education, support, and digital skills risk further marginalization. A clear gap remains between labor market expectations, education systems and the realities of vulnerable young women.

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The information collected shows that employability is not only about technical skills but requires a combination of:

- personal competencies (self-awareness, resilience, adaptability)
- relational intelligence (communication, empathy)
- applied intelligence (digital and practical skills)

The MI Competence Framework is therefore highly relevant, as it allows broader understanding of diverse forms of intelligence and strengths that are often overlooked in traditional systems. However, to be truly effective, it must be:

- practical and accessible
- connected to real-life contexts and labor market realities
- adaptable to different target groups

The perspective of the interviewed young woman highlights the gap between existing competencies and the ability to translate them into clear career pathways. Her experience highlights the importance of structured guidance, accessible information, and confidence-building support.

Overall, the results highlight the urgent need for integrated approaches that combine emotional development, career guidance, and digital competencies development. Strengthening these areas will improve not only employability but also building confidence, independence and will support young women effectively in an AI-driven labor market.

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