

New Quality of Leadership and Management in Tech Startups – Why Supporting Gender Equality Matters. A Case Study of the Project “Shesnnovation Academy”

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Abstract

Aim: This article analysed the problem of gender equality in tech startups. The main aim of the article was to show how important it is to support women founding their tech startups to enhance the demanded social change.

Methodology: The methodological approach was based on the functional theory of change (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, 1957), theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and the entrepreneurial event model (Shapero & Sokol, 1982) to show how institutionalised support creates a positive impact on the decisions made by women in technology industries. The research also focused on Project Management Institute standards to show how particular projects supporting women in technologies and innovations should be designed.

Results: The collected results were considered in the category of change, in terms of the motivation for change, the benefits of change and the approach to being a leader understood as an agent of change.

Implications and recommendations: It was discovered that programmes such as the Shesnnovation Academy, if well run, can bring on a change in mentality. The study showed that the current European Union programmes encourage the creation of such grassroots initiatives that have an impact on the local community.

Originality/value: The research focused on gender equality in the framework of the SDGs (United Nations, 2015). Their main value was to show the impact of grassroots endeavors, supporting gender equality in the technological field, and on changing the perception of women themselves.

Keywords: social change, gender equality, women founders of technology startups, women in project management

1. Introduction

The Gender Social Norms Index (UNDP, 2023) quantifies prejudice against women along four basic dimensions: political, economic, educational, and physical integrity. Gender-biased social norms underestimating women's capabilities and rights in society – limit women's choices and opportunities, regulating behaviour and setting boundaries for what is expected of women and who they are. Biased social norms related to gender are a major obstacle to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (Fundacja Perspektywy, 2023).

Up to 60 percent of women who consider starting their own business do not do so due to lack of self-confidence and insufficient faith in their knowledge and skills, which are symptoms typical of the imposter syndrome. Doubts about one's competences and the conviction that one does not deserve success can appear in both women and men, but in the case of the former, the syndrome more often affects the professional sphere and prevents women from turning their ideas into a business.

According to the Polish Startups 2022 Report (Startup Poland, 2022), women constitute more than half of the team in only 21% of startups, and there are only 15% of startups where women exceed half of the workforce. At the same time, it has already been proven that companies with more women on their board improve decision-making and respond better to change. Gender-balanced boardrooms are almost 20% more likely to improve business outcomes (International Labor Organization, 2019), and companies that add just one more woman to their board achieve an ROI of 8 to 13 basis points (Kestel, 2023), yet globally only 19.7% of board seats are held by women (Deloitte, 2022). The question is not if – but how – this could be altered to increase the number of women founding and managing tech startups.

The above data show an urgent need for social change that will lead to equal opportunities for women in technologies to fulfil their full potential and strengthen the startup ecosystem.

The authors approached this issue from several theoretical perspectives:

- the theory of social change and change management;
- the concept of sustainable development (including Sustainable Development Goals agenda);
- Project Management Institute standards.

The study focused on examples of activities undertaken in order to support the achievement of the desired social change towards greater gender equality, in particular on tech startups founded by women. Without social change it will not be possible to achieve any goals in the gender equality agenda.

2. Diversity Management and Startup Ecosystem

2.1. Gender Inequalities in Startup Ecosystems – Why Do We Need Social Change?

Social change in general is a change happening within the system or in the system as a whole (Parsons, 1951; Luhman, 2007). The term comprises three elements: (1) difference (2) in different points of time (3) between conditions of the system itself (Sztompka, 2010), however the idea of progress (i.e. the

idea of change, thanks to which societies develop) makes perfect sense only if there is transformation of the system (not only within the system). Essential elements of such change towards a higher level of civilization are individuals that influence the structures within which they function.

A more complex definition of social development is social progress. The latest approaches to the definition of progress are oriented towards the concept of an active society. There are factors that enable the society to become active, i.e. more progressive: (1) creative individuals willing to make changes, (2) social structures allowing for creative activity (plural, open, flexible), (3) positive attitude of individuals towards tradition, (4) optimistic vision of individuals about the expected future (strategic thinking, anticipation, long-term planning, and constant mobilisation) (Sztompka, 2010). The concept of progress makes sense only if transformation is the final effect (change of the whole system, and not only change within it).

Note that it is important to create and develop diverse kinds of instruments (regulations, programmes, projects, etc.) that will support the individuals to act actively on behalf of gender equality.

Within this research, the authors were particularly interested in identifying such instruments that could make a change in the technology startup ecosystem, supporting the development of startups founded by women.

According to the functional theory of change (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, 1957) society is a system consisting of interconnected parts, each of which performs a specific function in that system. A characteristic feature of this system is the existence of diverse social roles and positions, associated with diverse rights and obligations, and the existence of common norms and values that are shared and agreed on by members of society. For this system to persist, the following conditions must be met: the system must be able to adapt, achieve goals, integrate and maintain patterns of operation (Patnaik, 2024). The theory attempts to explain why society functions the way it does by focusing on the relations between the various social institutions that make up society, such as government, law, culture, education, religion. One of the key ideas is that social groups share common norms and culture. In the case of gender equality, the given roles enable for smooth functioning since everyone knows their social position, which helps society to function within its framework – hence structural functionalism might be seen as supportive of the status quo. However, the change is going to take place in the structures if the functions no longer play their roles for the good of society, common norms and culture change, because they do not constitute shared values anymore.

The research showed there is an authentic need to change the status quo when it comes to gender equality issues.

Social change, in general, is about the transformation of societal norms, values, and institutions over time. There is a strong interconnection between social change and sustainable development, which provides a specified framework to address environmental, social, and economic challenges (including gender equality) in an organised manner.

The concept of sustainable development has become a widely recognised goal for human society in the 21st century, and came to light in 1987 with the publication of “Our Common Future”, which firmly established sustainable development as a critical component of international development (Hajian & Kashani, 2021). One of the results of the sustainable development concept was setting up the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). One of the goals is Gender Equality: “Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” (United Nations, 2015).

To sum up, for social change to occur, there is a great need to support a network of entities and institutional solutions. Hence, it is necessary for the whole system to engage diverse organizations and activities that will support the desired direction of change. One such organization that builds, implements and exercises specific actions that will cause social change towards more gender-equal rules is the European Union.

In the perspective of project management, change is the property of systems. Satir's model (see Satir, 2000) was used to explain the change, and although the study focused on family therapy, her theory has also spread to other areas of social life. According to the author, it is normal that people are afraid of change and protect themselves from it. In the first stage, there is the status quo that we want to change. Next, there appears some element that disrupts it, when a period of resistance often occurs. Those involved do not feel comfortable, so there is an element of chaos, reaching a point where they are looking for an idea that allows to make sense of the new situation. New ideas and modes of behaviour need to be integrated, implemented and turned into a routine. This is the path of formation of a new status quo.

2.2. Making Social Change: from Ideas to Action – EU Supporting Women Founding Their Technology Startups

In the EU strategy there is a clear message that it is necessary to support gender equality to obtain sustainable development, to meet the expected social change, and gender equality is one of the basic rules of the whole EU system. Already the Treaty of the Functioning of the EU in Article 8 stated: "In its all activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities and to promote equality, between men and women" (European Union, 1957).

The most important acts and programmes supporting change against gender inequalities are, among others (Kwieciński, 2023):

- "Europe 2020. A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth" (2010): Policies to promote gender equality will be needed to increase labour force participation, thus adding to growth and social cohesion (European Commission, 2010).
- "The White Paper on the Future of Europe" (European Commission, 2017): using the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs) as a compass, the paper identifies key enablers for the transition towards sustainability. According to this debate one of the key challenges of sustainable development is the need to eliminate income and access to education inequalities by ensuring the equal treatment of women and men.
- "Commission's Working Programme 2020" (2019): A Union that strives for more – priorities for 2030: Ursula von der Leyen underlined that gender equality is an absolute priority (von der Leyen, 2019).
- "The Ljubljana Declaration" (2021): "It highlights the need to be proactive in mainstreaming gender equality across research and innovation, to ensure a just twin transition, triggering new inclusive ways of life for all. The Ljubljana Declaration will bear fruit in the new, revitalized European Research Area (ERA) as an ERA Policy Agenda Action on promoting gender equality and fostering inclusiveness, delivered over the next 3 years" (Republic of Slovenia, 2021).
- "A New ERA for Research and Innovation" (2020) – regulates gender equality in long-term solutions that lead to innovation at the level of more than European research consortia: new criteria of financing under the Horizon Europe Programme (European Commission, 2010).
- Women TechEU – aimed at closing the gender innovation deficit by supporting women-led high-tech companies at the early stage of their business development, funded under the European Innovation Ecosystems work programme of Horizon Europe (Women TechEU, 2021).
- EIC Women Leadership Programme (EISMEA, 2022) – programme supporting the role of women in innovation and tech, offers a skills enhancement and networking programme for women researchers and entrepreneurs, the Women Leadership Programme (WLP).

There are more initiatives realised by different actors in the EU member states that support the idea of gender equality in the technology startups' ecosystem.

One such project implemented in Poland is the Shesnnovation Academy – an acceleration programme for women-founded STEM startups implemented by the Perspektywy Education Foundation in 2020-

-2024, listed by the OECD in its report *The Missing Entrepreneurs. Inclusive Entrepreneurship Policy Country Assessment Notes: Poland, 2022-2023*¹. The Shesnnovation Academy is a unique programme addressed to enterprising women MA students, PhD students and graduates of technical and science faculties (not exclusively). This is the first and only such programme in Poland, supporting women-led startups in STEM (Shesnnovation Academy, 2021).

This is the project the authors focused on as an example of activities aiming at elimination of gender inequality in the field of technologies, innovation, entrepreneurship.

3. Methodology

The case study method was used. First, the authors analysed the process of the project management (also change management), and then conducted ten in-depth interviews (IDIs) with the alumni and current participants of the Shesnnovation Academy, applying the ASR (Automatic Speech Recognition) system of CLARIN-PL (Pol et al., 2018, p. 489) to convert the spoken statements to text.

The main aim of the research was to identify how important it is to support women founding their tech startups to enhance the demanded social change. The research also aimed at showing how institutionalised support might create a positive impact on the decisions made by women in technology industries.

The research was based on the theory of planned behaviour and the entrepreneurial event model. The former deals with behaviour influenced by intentions determined by three factors: attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991) and regards the readiness and determination of women startup founders to develop their entrepreneurial undertakings if supported by diverse actors of the innovation ecosystem, as well as by programmes and projects enabling them to start this career path. The latter shows that before any entrepreneurial behaviour there is the intention to engage, provided the right opportunity arises (Shapero & Sokol, 1982). In this study it concerned relevant programmes and projects providing such opportunities that will cause women to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

The authors approached the interviewees with 11 questions, dividing the interview into two parts:

- motivation and respondents' attitude towards social change regarding gender equality:
 - the need of such initiatives and their usefulness;
 - influence of such projects on decision making process; towards starting your own company.
 Followed by
- case study project – Shesnnovation Academy:
 - the reason to join the project;
 - distinguishing factors of this particular project;
 - expectations towards the project;
 - perceived risks;
 - benefits and shortcomings;
 - recommendations for future projects supporting women in technologies.

According to the Project Management Institute standard (Project Management Institute, 2021), the authors treated the organizations' activities in running projects and their portfolios as a value delivery

¹ All applicants must have a gender equality plan; gender mainstreaming as an implicit requirement when defining the content of research and innovation calls across the programme; measures and actions to promote gender equality within the European Innovation Council are defined and ensure the implementation of the gender equality principle in research teams, with the aim that women account for 50% of board members, expert groups and evaluation committees which are part of Horizon Europe; gender balance has become a deciding criterion for funding research teams for proposals with the same result.

system. These activities are happening in the internal and external environment. The first of them is understood as the environment of organization. Further in this article, these actions are often treated as motivations for change. The second is constituted by directives of the European Union at the start, and then by the legislation of the member states and the actions of social institutions and organizations.

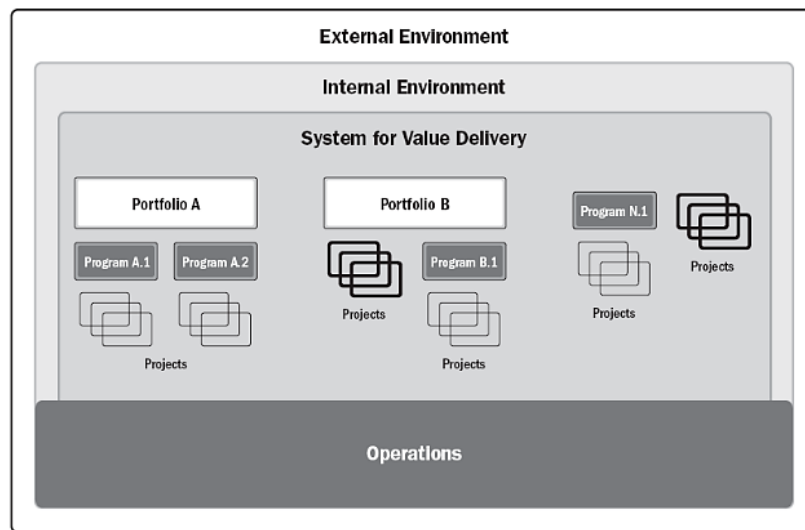


Figure 1. Components of a sample system for value delivery

Source: (Project Management Institute, 2021, p. 53).

Using the PMI terminology, projects are defined as individual and unique components of programmes; both the projects and programmes are included in the organization's system of value delivery. In this perspective, each edition of the Sheesnovation Academy is defined as a project, while the entirety of all editions are treated as a programme.

Lanning and Philips (1991) described a company as a "System integrated around the profitable Delivery of some superior Value Proposition" (VDS – Value Delivery System). In companies in which total cost below revenues, allowing an acceptable return, is the obvious objective of a business, then a business can be described in terms of the activities needed to accomplish this objective. Thus, the activities of the company are integrated around the profitable Delivery of some superior Value Proposition, including choosing, providing and communicating a superior Value Proposition (Lanning & Philips, 1991, pp. 5-6). This concept assumes that the most important achievement in the activity of a company is to improve the customer's life (real end-result benefits from the customer's perspective), not the goals of the business. According to this theory, there are three variables in the project process: the input (the customer's need), activities of the company (in this case – of the project) aiming at satisfying the need, and the output (the solutions understood as a way to satisfy the need, which can be defined in terms of the project's success).

4. Can We Count on Social Change – More Gender Equality in Tech Startups? Results of the Research

4.1. Expected Social Change

When asked if initiatives such as the Shesnovation Academy are needed for social change to occur in terms of gender equality, none of the interviewees said no. On the contrary – all of them decidedly confirmed that such programmes are necessary, especially that the changes are happening too slowly for women trying to conquer the startup market. The respondents agreed that the more such programmes, the greater the social awareness of the problem, and the more people will be trying to change this.

The respondents also underlined the power of networking occurring thanks to such supportive instruments – which allows for building communities of the next generation of women startup founders supporting one another, more role models, more inspiration. This is something that motivates them to work even harder, to achieve their goals, to become braver in their endeavours.

The respondents also repeatedly underlined the uniqueness of the Shesnnovaton Academy, a programme dedicated completely to support women startup founders. This kind of formula has given them a great opportunity to share very similar experiences, both social and professional, in a safe space. This has made a real difference, as they have had a chance to identify themselves with the very same problems they face as women startup founders in the male dominated tech industry.

4.2. Motivation

The interviewees were also asked about their motivations, expectations and the status of the projects they want to carry out.

Classically, a distinction is made between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, however this distinction does not apply to the participants of the Shesnnovation Academy, because they all have an intrinsic motivation. Thus, the reasons women joined the programme were analysed using Pink's theory of motivation, whose author identified three types of intrinsic motivators: autonomy, mastery and purpose (Pink, 2009). All those three types are visible in the statements of the participants.

According to Pink, people have a natural sense of autonomy, which is being taken away from them by an attempt at control. Autonomy does not equal independence. One can be autonomous and independent at the same time. Autonomy is understood in this context as the need to direct one's own life. In the conducted interviews, there are mentions of:

- something of its own, independent, functioning according to the rules imposed by the owner: *I woke up one day and said that I just want to be authentic, I want to be myself. [...] I just want to be comfortable with that², [...] I don't have to depend on my employer³;*
- responding to problems at a higher level (reacting to the crisis): *I will actually end up [...] with a start-up that I manage to set up at the university. And I had such hopes until the last moment, but well, unfortunately, it turned out to be impossible at our university.⁴, [...] in fact, alternatively, I can write an application and put the invention on the shelf, which I do not want to do, because it.... what sense does it make.⁵ I bounced off a wall.⁶ I was get so to the max polite, so forceful, with this kind of institutionalism⁷;*
- emerging autonomy in connection with the discovery of new paths of development: *I had feeling that in general this program still has [...] just one leg so... psychotherapeutic.... suddenly it turned out that all of them used to be burned out, that it seems to me that [...] all of them had some kind of problem just a little bit related to work, or identity, or burnout just kind of related to a role of some kind at work⁸, [...] looking for something new for myself outside of this standard work I perform⁹.*

² *Ja pewnego dnia obudziłam się i powiedziałam, że ja po prostu chcę być autentyczna, chcę być sobą. [...] Ja chcę się po prostu czuć z tym komfortowo.*

³ *[...] nie muszę być uzależniona od pracodawcy.*

⁴ *I że ja naprawdę skończę [...] ze start-upem, który uda mi się założyć przy uczelni. I miałam taką nadzieję do ostatniego momentu, ale no niestety okazało się, że jest to u nas w uczelni niemożliwe.*

⁵ *[...] w zasadzie ewentualnie mogę napisać wniosek i położyć wynalazek na półkę, czego nie chcę robić, bo to... jaki to ma sens.*

⁶ *Odbiłam się od ściany.*

⁷ *Byłam tak na maksa ugrzeczniana, tak na siłę, w tym takim instytucjonalizmie.*

⁸ *Miałam wrażenie, że w ogóle ten program jeszcze [...] po prostu jedną nogą taką... psychoterapeutyczną... nagle się okazało, że wszystkie kiedyś były wypalone, że wydaje mi się, że wszystkie miały jakiś problem właśnie trochę związany z pracą, albo tożsamością, albo wypaleniem takim właśnie związanym z rolą jakąś taką w pracy.*

⁹ *[...] szukania sobie czegoś nowego poza tą standardową moją pracą, którą wykonuję.*

Mastery, described by Pink as *the desire to get better and better at something that matters* (Pink, 2009, p. 111). In the case of the female interviewees, one could distinguish three groups of this kind of motivation:

- increasing knowledge and skills: *So I had this expectation [...] two-fold about the project and about myself, that I would be a better professional¹⁰; I was looking at where I could [...] dig more deeply into my knowledge¹¹;*
- gaining contacts and sharing experiences: *[...] the biggest negative is that I didn't have [in previous work] any mentor [...] anyone, whom I would feel such respect and have a sense of learning. [...] Everything is done there like a free American. If I didn't know how to do something, there was no one to go to¹²; [...] it can be normal. In the sense of normal, that you can work or cooperate with people, like with girls who also want to, who want to help you selflessly, because I didn't have that at work.¹³; I didn't want to work anymore because too many things were [...] on my mind and there was no one with whom I could even just talk at all¹⁴;*
- self-criticism, low self-esteem and trying to improve your situation: *I was terribly stressed. This was one of the next mileposts for me to gain self-confidence. I was terribly closed in on myself. Similarly, I had such fear in my body that my hands just stood still.¹⁵; Is a little bit about self-confidence, because. as long as you're poking around in your room and connecting wires, that's the comfort zone, and getting out of the comfort zone is showing it to the world¹⁶; "There were times when I, at interviews about my own project.... Well I don't hide that with guys, I felt like I was in a job interview. I think to myself, this is kind of strange, that I would talk about what I know best, what I came up with and is [...] mine, and I feel that someone here is examining me on my own project.¹⁷*

In some situations, the mastery could be not only an asset but also a barrier: *my education is scientific and we need to fine tune everything¹⁸; [...] I was taking a little bit of a lot of stuff at the time and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to make it, but you just created such an atmosphere.¹⁹, I have started this work of getting out of my comfort zone almost a year before this project, for the reason that I ended up in therapy in the behavioural stream against hyper perfectionism, such extreme²⁰.*

This second source of motivation is linked to the third one – a sense of purpose. According to Pink, purpose consciousness is related to a sense of influence to make a difference. In the interviews, two groups of purposes stand out: personal purposes, related to personal development, business develop-

¹⁰ *Więc miałam takie oczekiwania [...] dwutorowe co do projektu i co do siebie samej, że będę lepszą profesjonalistką.*

¹¹ *Patrzyłam, gdzie mogę [...] bardziej pogłębić swoją wiedzę.*

¹² *Największy minus, że nie miałam [w poprzedniej pracy] żadnego mentora, mentorki [...] kogokolwiek, do kogo bym czuła taki szacunek i [...] miała poczucie, że uczę się. [...] wszystko się tam robi jak wolna amerykanka. Jak ja czegoś nie wiedziałam, jak zrobić, to nie miałam do kogo pójść.*

¹³ *[...] może być normalnie. W sensie normalnie, że możesz pracować czy współpracować z ludźmi, tak jak z dziewczynami, którym też się chce, którzy chcą ci pomóc bezinteresownie, bo ja tak nie miałam w pracy.*

¹⁴ *Nie chciałam już pracować, bo za dużo rzeczy było [...] na mojej głowie i nikogo nie było, z kim ja mogłabym w ogóle nawet tylko porozmawiać.*

¹⁵ *Byłam strasznie zestresowana. To był jeden z kolejnych traków milowych do tego, żeby uzyskać pewność siebie. Byłam strasznie zamknięta w sobie. Podobnie miałam w ciele taki stres, że po prostu stały mi ręce.*

¹⁶ *Jest trochę o pewności siebie, bo dopóki się grzebie w swoim pokoju i łączy się kabelki, to właśnie jest strefa komfortu, a wyjście ze strefy komfortu to jest pokazanie tego świata.*

¹⁷ *Bywało tak, że ja na rozmowach o własnym projekcie... no nie ukrywam, że z facetami, czułam się jak na rozmowie kwalifikacyjnej. Myślę sobie, to jest jakieś dziwne, żebym ja mówiła o tym, co ja znam najlepiej, co ja wymyśliłam i jest [...] moje, a ja czuję, że ktoś mnie tu egzaminuje z mojego własnego projektu.*

¹⁸ *Moje wykształcenie jest naukowe i musimy wszystko dopieszczać.*

¹⁹ *Więc trochę dużo rzeczy wtedy brałam i bałam się, że nie dam rady, ale właśnie wytworzyłyście taką atmosferę.*

²⁰ *Ja zaczęłam tę pracę z wychodzeniem ze strefy komfortu prawie rok wcześniej przed tym projektem, dlatego że ja trafiłam na terapię taką w nurcie behawioralnym przeciwko nadperfekcjonizmowi, takiemu skrajnemu.*

ment or the acquisition of knowledge and competence, and collective goals, important, according to the interviewees, for the whole community of women:

- personal: *I'm fulfilling myself*²¹;
- personal related to the company: *I very much didn't want [...] this idea of mine to be just another engineering, scientific idea put in a drawer [...], only that it could actually be useful to someone*²²;
- collective: *I really liked the fact that it [the project] is targeting women, on girls: It [...] is oriented to let women develop too, so that [...] their idea, [...] their project develops*²³, *If we develop this change from the bottom up, it's as if we continue to let such an injection [...] into a sick organism, which begins to heal that organism from the inside*²⁴.

In addition, one can talk about callers with strong and weak motivation. The former already have their first projects and products and joined the programme to gain knowledge of market activities (knowledge of finance and product building is often mentioned). Women with weak motivation use phrases that imply that, in their opinion, they got there by accident and wanted to try: *Why wouldn't I try*²⁵, *I had no clue before, because I was not even interested in this topic*²⁶.

In the statements, women's needs for self-development are evident, i.e. specialised development, acquisition of knowledge, linked to the development of the company, but also the development of soft and social skills. The respondents talked in the interviews about the project as a kind of therapy to restore their self-confidence. There are also fragments in their statements saying that a similar therapy would be useful for the whole community of women.

4.3. Advantages

In the material presented above, a large proportion of female candidates for the programme entered the project with specific expectations and motivation. According to the theory presented by Lanning and Philips (1991), an organization, knowing these needs, should ensure that the recipients of its activities meet them through a certain value proposition, demonstrated through the organization's activities. As a result, the participants should receive a proposal to solve their problems and/or tools to enable them to do that.

In this particular case, one can distinguish four types of solutions, enabling creating a new quality of life and work for the participants of the Shesnnovation Academy:

- knowledge and know-how acquisition that are implemented through the following activities: mentoring programmes, workshops, training, meetings with experts, case studies of start-up founders and their histories, building the community (of experts and founders), networking, shape soft and hard skills (business and financial model, budgeting, public speaking and preparation of information for investors, also in pitch-deck form);
- participation, attendance about which the participants commented as follows: *[...] what you read will never reach you like what you hear [...]*²⁷, *[...] there was an [...] openness to this communication, that we could ask each other, that it was this space for [...] active participation in these workshops*²⁸;

²¹ *[...] ja się spełniam[...].*

²² *Bardzo nie chciałam [...], żeby ten mój pomysł był takim kolejnym inżynierskim, naukowym pomysłem schowanym do... szuflady [...], tylko żeby on faktycznie mógł komuś posłużyć.*

²³ *Bardzo podobało mi się to, że on [projekt] jest ukierunkowany na kobiety, na dziewczyny. [...] jest ukierunkowany na to, żeby kobiety się też rozwijały, żeby [...] ich pomysł, [...] ich projekt się rozwijał.*

²⁴ *Jeżeli oddolnie będziemy rozwijać tę zmianę, to tak jakbyśmy dalej wpuścili taką iniekcję [...] do chorego organizmu, która zaczyna od środka ten organizm uzdrawiać.*

²⁵ *Dlaczego miałabym nie spróbować?*

²⁶ *Nie miałam zielonego pojęcia wcześniej, bo nawet się nie interesowałam tym tematem.*

²⁷ *[...] to, co przeczytasz, nigdy nie dotrze do ciebie tak jak to, co usłyszysz [...].*

²⁸ *[...] była [...] otwartość na tę komunikację, że mogliśmy się dopytać, że to była ta przestrzeń na, na jakieś właśnie takie aktywne uczestniczenie w tych warsztatach.*

- support and understanding – this group of statements revolve around the problems of insecurity and low self-esteem, which the project participants to deal with; they talked directly about support, understanding, but also about: communication incentive, creating a feeling of security, building self-confidence, atmosphere of openness and encouraging to be open, safe environment, being together, community building, *building a tribe of people who are in a similar situation*²⁹, openness in knowledge sharing.

The interviewees also talked about the advantages of the programme itself, in which they include: a coherent narrative about the programme and project, minimising the sense of uncertainty, the Perspectives brand, long-terms actions (several editions of the programme), planning training sessions in advance, offering the tools that can be useful in a variety of situations. In one interview the following words appeared: *[...] it is building such a new reality [...] socially responsible, [...] more empathetic*³⁰.

4.4. Leadership

Some of the interviewees talked about their perspective on male-female relations in the professional space and treat this division as a dichotomy. The topic of women's leadership (sometimes also in opposition to men's leadership) appears in several statements. They talked about the problems of assembling the team, involving different competencies of members, which are hard to complete (there are no appropriate tools for this).

Another topic that emerged was the problem with breaking out in the masculine environment (*I managed to force the fact that I am the leader in this group*³¹). This applied especially to those women, whose work on scientific research, tough engineering and deep-tech and about willingness to work in women's communities: *I think I will be employing these women in the future*³²; *This is where women who will later be CEOs, will be [...] CEOs, will be funders [...] are mentored*³³.

Women's leadership was also considered from the perspective of neurodiversity and problems in the work environment of highly sensitive people: *[...] it's such a challenge for me, how to become a highly responsive leader [...]. But I'm up for it [...] positive [...]*³⁴, *[...] as I was submitting a resume somewhere, I [...] would not fail to point out that it is important to me that, for example, the C.E.O. or on the board of directors is a woman*³⁵.

Women's leadership was also described from the perspective of the competencies that a leader should have, and that which the participants believe they have: *I don't harm anyone [...]. If I am indeed sowing goodness around me, then there is value. And that was the change that I went through. Now I'm on a mission to help other women, because I also know what I went through myself, and it was terribly sad*³⁶; *I don't like to say employee, but co-worker, partner or inspirer, or person employed by the company*³⁷; *I take a lot of energy from other people, but I can also give it to myself. And I need to work with such people*³⁸.

²⁹ Budowanie plemienia osób, które są w podobnej sytuacji.

³⁰ [...] to jest budowanie takiej nowej rzeczywistości [...] społecznie odpowiedzialnej [...] empatyczniejszej.

³¹ Udało mi się wymusić to, że ja jestem liderem w tej grupie.

³² Myślę, że będę zatrudniać kobiety w przyszłości.

³³ [...] tutaj mentorowane są kobiety, które później będą prezeskami [...] będą CEO, będą founderkami [...]

³⁴ [...] jest to dla mnie takie wyzwanie, jak zostać wysoko wrażliwym liderem [...] Ale jestem do tego [...] pozytywnie nastawiona [...].

³⁵ [...] jak składałam gdzieś CV, to [...] nie omieszkałam zaznaczyć, że dla mnie istotne jest to, że na przykład CEO albo w zarządzie jest kobieta.

³⁶ Nie krzywdzę nikogo. Jeżeli rzeczywiście sięję wokół siebie dobro, to jest wartością. I to była ta zmiana, którą ja przesłam. Teraz mam misję pomagania innym kobietom, bo sama też wiem, co przesłam, i było to strasznie smutne.

³⁷ Nie lubię mówić pracownik, ale współpracownik, partner czy inspirator, czy osoba zatrudniona w firmie.

³⁸ Ja biorę dużo energii od innych ludzi, ale sama też ją potrafię dać. I ja potrzebuję z takimi ludźmi pracować.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, the authors took a closer look at how programmes supporting women founding their startups could enhance a social change towards more gender-equal societies.

The study discovered that thanks to programmes such as the Shesnnovation Academy, if designed in the right way, it was possible to create a greater positive impact on women's decisions and their motivation to found and develop their own technology startups.

It is also worth mentioning that in the case of the Shesnnovation Academy, some of the programme's assumptions require refinement, especially at the recruitment stage. The programme was intended for women founders of startups, but these projects are usually at different stages of development. This means support does not perfectly meet all founders' needs. It should also include further support, such as market financing opportunities, otherwise many of these projects fail to develop after the end of the programme.

Aside from such programmes, it is also necessary to further develop policies, regulations, projects and financial support that will lead to greater gender equality in the tech industry and to use its full potential. Today, society needs completely diversified teams to be able to achieve social progress, and not only social development. It is the whole system that needs to be changed.

Programmes such as the Shesnnovation Academy support women with the acquiring knowledge and know-how and thus becoming better professionals. These women will be future CEOs and senior managers in the various kinds of activity in the market. Hence, new patterns of leadership are created, but at the same time they function as a form of collective acquisition of features important for leaders and high-qualified workers, namely self-esteem, self-confidence and sensitivity to other people.

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Nowa jakość przywództwa i zarządzania w startupach technologicznych – dlaczego wspieranie równości płci ma znaczenie?

Studium przypadku projektu „Shesnnoation Academy”

Streszczenie

Cel: W artykule przeanalizowano problem równości płci w start-upach technologicznych. Głównym celem artykułu było pokazanie, jak ważne jest wspieranie kobiet zakładających start-upy technologiczne w celu zwiększenia pożądanej zmiany społecznej.

Metodologia: Podejście metodologiczne opierało się na funkcjonalnej teorii zmiany (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, 1957), teorii zachowań planowanych (Ajzen, 1991) i modelu zdarzeń przedsiębiorczych (Shapero i Sokol, 1982), aby pokazać, w jaki sposób zinstytucjonalizowane wsparcie wywiera pozytywny wpływ na decyzje podejmowane przez kobiety w branżach technologicznych. Badania skupiły się również na standardach Project Management Institute, aby pokazać, w jaki sposób powinny być projektowane konkretne projekty wspierające kobiety w technologiach i innowacjach.

Wyniki: Zebrane wyniki rozpatrywano w kategorii zmiany, pod kątem motywacji do zmiany, korzyści płynących ze zmiany i podejścia do bycia liderką.

Wnioski i zalecenia: Odkryto, że programy takie jak Shesnnoation Academy, jeśli są dobrze prowadzone, mogą przynieść zmianę mentalności. Badanie wykazało, że obecne programy Unii Europejskiej zachęcają do tworzenia takich oddolnych inicjatyw, które mają wpływ na lokalną społeczność.

Oryginalność/wartość: Badania koncentrowały się na równości płci w ramach SDGs (Organizacja Narodów Zjednoczonych, 2015). Ich główną wartością było pokazanie wpływu oddolnych wysiłków, wspierających równość płci w dziedzinie technologii i zmieniających postrzeganie siebie samych kobiet.

Słowa kluczowe: zmiana społeczna, równouprawnienie płci, kobiety założycielki startupów technologicznych, kobiety w zarządzaniu projektami
