



Gender Equality in Action: Women's Leadership in the 'Environment Programme' (EEA Grants Portugal, 2014–2021)

Empowering innovation, inclusion, and systemic environmental change

Executive Summary

This article highlights the fundamental role of women in promoting sustainability through their leadership in the EEA Grants Portugal “Environment Programme” (2014-2021). Among the 60 projects funded, 14 were led by women who promoted innovative approaches in areas such as the circular economy, biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation and environmental education. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, the article demonstrates how female leadership contributed to positive environmental outcomes, strengthened local partnerships and ensured the effective use of funding. It also aligns these contributions with the EU's Sustainable Development Goals and gender equality strategies. By presenting concrete examples, this paper underlines the value of inclusive leadership and provides evidence of the relevance of gender-sensitive approaches in environmental funding programmes. The conclusions aim to inform policy debates and inspire further integration of gender equality and sustainability into public funding frameworks across Europe and call for greater political commitment to gender-sensitive environmental funding, preparing the ground for the next funding cycle.

Keywords:

Gender Equality; Female Leadership; Environmental Sustainability; Circular Economy; Community Engagement; Innovation; Inclusive Governance; EEA Grants Portugal; 'Environment Programme'; SDG 5; SDG 13; Systemic Impact

1. Introduction

Promoting gender equality in innovation and environmental sustainability is a global priority, reinforced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and core European and National policies frameworks. While studies confirm that women remain underrepresented in leadership roles within environmental initiatives across many regions, increasing female participation has consistently emerged as a catalyst for more inclusive, balanced, and high-impact outcomes.

Women are at the forefront of sustainable innovation and environmental protection. Their leadership brings not only technical expertise but also a systemic approach — one that

integrates social, economic, and ecological dimensions. By fostering inclusion and forging strategic partnerships, women strengthen the foundations for a more resilient and sustainable future.

The ‘Environment Programme’, funded by the EEA, Grants supports this vision. Between 2014 and 2021, it financed 60 projects to advance sustainability, innovation, and climate resilience in Portugal. Among these, 14 projects were led by women, offering clear evidence of how female leadership drives progress in circular economy, biodiversity conservation, and local climate adaptation.

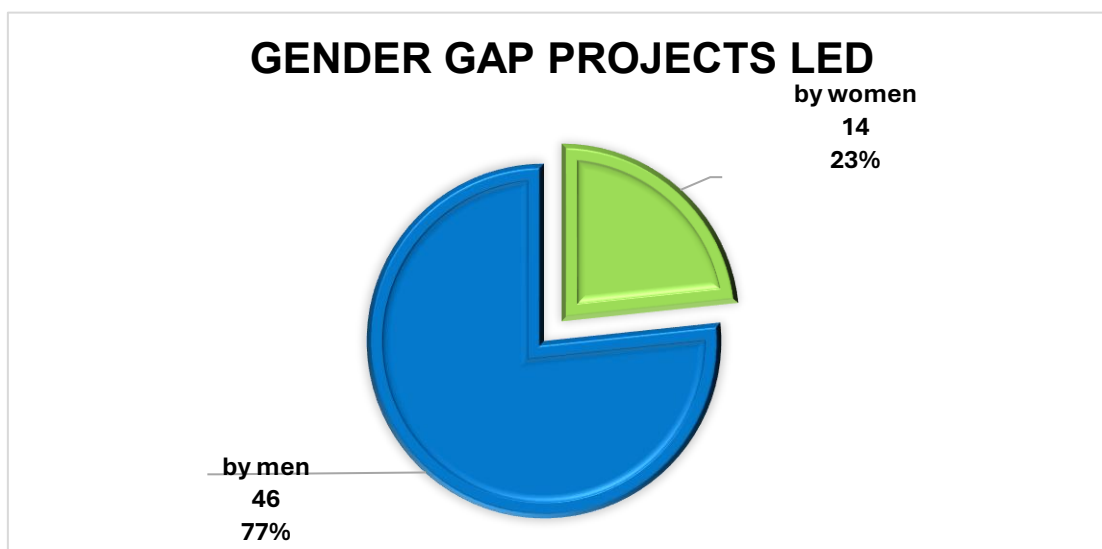
This article analyses the contributions of those women-led projects, demonstrating how their strategic roles align not only with global agendas — particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) — but also with the Programme’s underlying the external ex-post evaluation: that systemic impact arises from empowering key actors, mobilizing knowledge, and triggering inclusive, transformative pathways to sustainability.

2. Women in Leadership

Key facts:

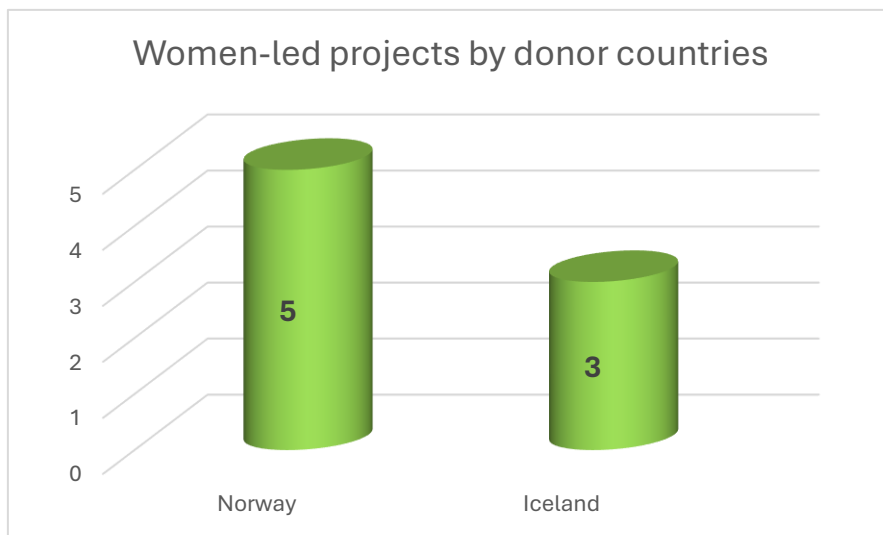
- Out of the 60 projects funded by the ‘Environment Programme’:

- 14 are led by women
- 46 are led by men



However, they also signal the emergence of a **transformative trend**: women leaders are at the helm of some of the Programme's **most innovative, inclusive, and high-impact projects**.

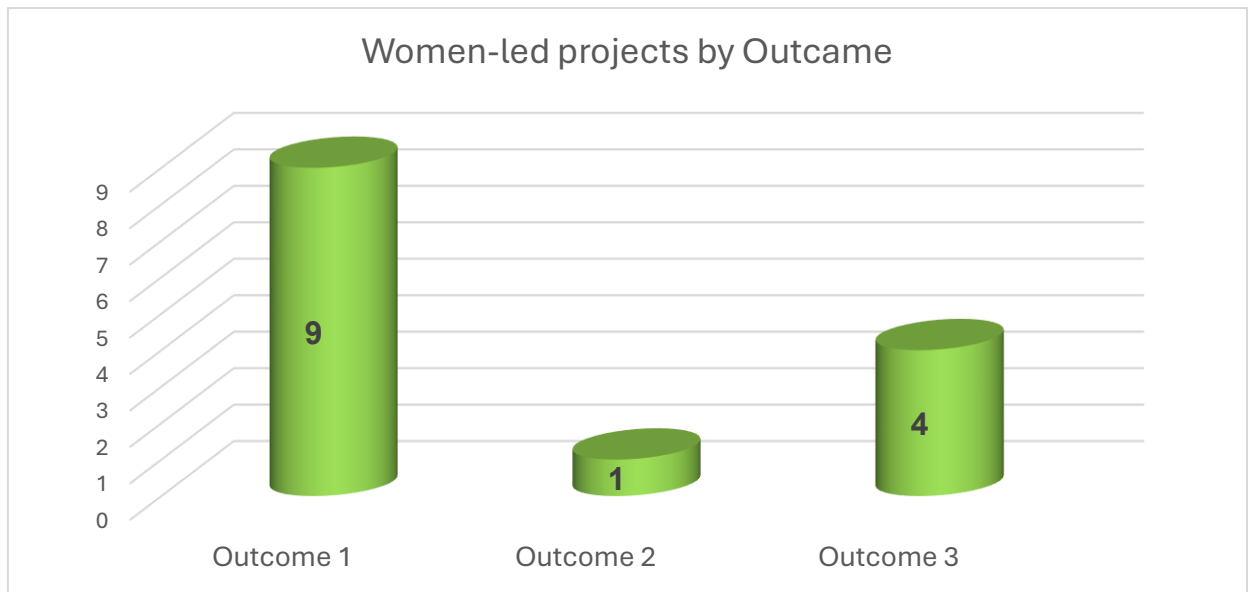
- Among the 14 projects led by women:
 - **6 involve partners from Donor Countries**, including **one project** that counts **three donor entities: 5 from Norway and 3 from Iceland**.



- These projects span **diverse stakeholders**, including:
 - Municipalities
 - Universities
 - Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)
 - The private sector

Women-led projects in the 'Environment Programme' are not only numerous but also diverse in their areas of intervention. These projects reflect strong leadership and significant contributions across the Programme's key strategic outcomes, as detailed below:

- They also demonstrate leadership across all three strategic outcomes of the 'Environment Programme':
 - **Outcome 1:** Increased application of circular economy principles in targeted sectors – 9 projects
 - **Outcome 2:** Enhanced sustainable development in Biosphere Reserves – 1 project
 - **Outcome 3:** Increased climate change resilience and responsiveness in targeted areas – 4 projects



This cross-cutting presence confirms that women are not merely participating — **they are actively shaping** the strategic vision and operational success of the Programme. Their leadership stands out in areas such as **technical innovation, community engagement, and policy alignment**, laying the groundwork for systemic and lasting environmental transformation.

Women lead projects across all three outcomes, bringing **fresh perspectives and innovative responses** to some of the Programme’s most pressing environmental challenges:

1. Application of circular economy principles
2. Sustainable development in Biosphere Reserves
3. Climate resilience and adaptive capacity in strategic regions

These projects were identified based on specific **selection criteria**, including:

- The presence of women as CEOs or technical representatives of the project
- The inclusion of actions explicitly aimed at promoting female participation
- A high degree of innovation — from holding European patents to certify buildings that use circular economy principles, and developing biodegradable fishing nets or creating bottles made entirely from recycled plastic.

Crucially, women’s leadership in environmental projects goes far beyond representation. It functions as a **catalyst for innovation, inclusiveness, and systemic change**. When women lead, projects tend to embrace **integrated, community-driven strategies** that merge environmental, economic, and social goals — laying stronger foundations for long-term impact.

This is not theoretical. It is backed by concrete results: **women-led projects consistently meet — and often exceed — their targets**, a trend clearly visible across the ‘Environment Programme’.

3. Women’s Contribution to Programme Areas

The 14 projects led by women are not only diverse in scope — they are also **thematically robust** and strategically aligned with key environmental priorities. These initiatives span a wide range of domains, from circular economy and marine litter reduction to climate adaptation and territorial valorization.

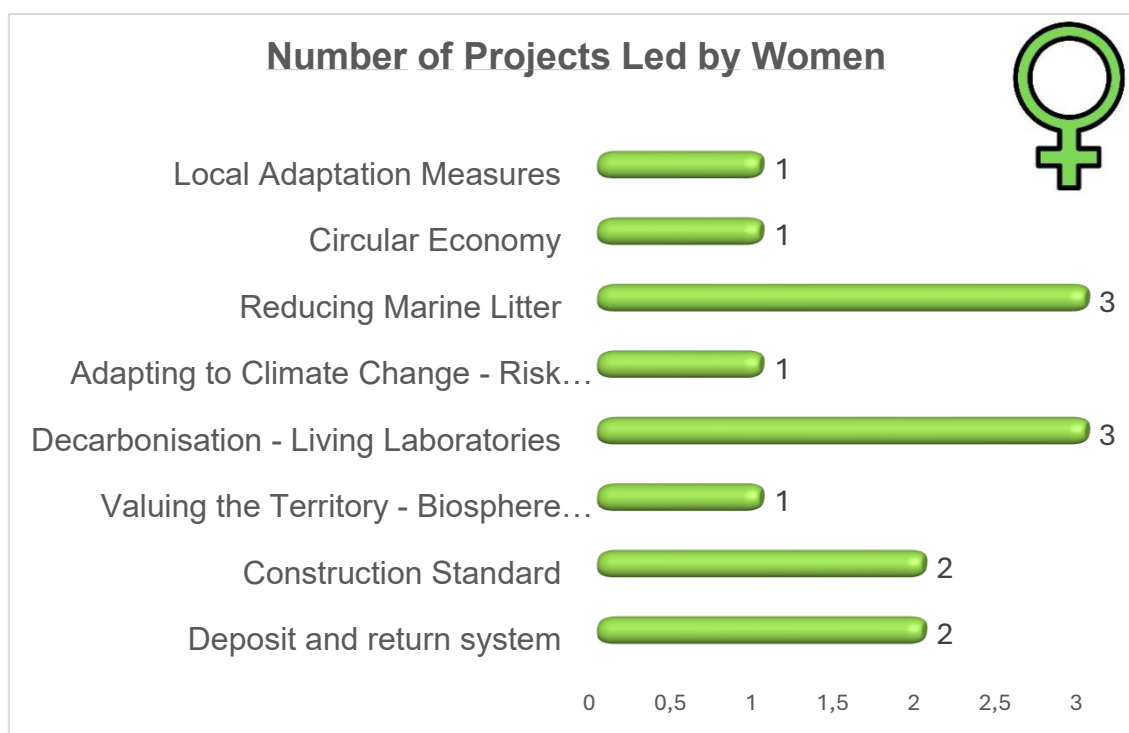
This thematic diversity reflects the **versatility, technical expertise, and strategic vision** of the women who lead them. It challenges traditional perceptions by showing that female leadership is not confined to areas often seen as less technical but extends to **complex, high-impact areas** of environmental policy and innovation.

The following table presents how these projects are distributed across the ‘Environment Programme’s’ main thematic areas:

Areas of Projects Led by Women	Number of Projects Led by Women
Local Adaptation Measures	1
Circular Economy Standard	1
Reducing Marine Litter	3
Adapting to Climate Change - Risk Management	1
Decarbonisation - Living Laboratories	3
Valuing the Territory - Biosphere Reserves	1
Promoting the Circular Economy - Construction Sector	2
Promoting the Circular Economy - Deposit and Return System	2

Priorities

*Thematic Distribution of Women-Led Projects in the 'Environment Programme' -
(Number of projects by environmental priority area, out of 14 total)*



This distribution confirms the **cross-sectoral reach and relevance** of female leadership within the Programme. It highlights the ability of these leaders to connect **local realities with national and global sustainability agendas**, advancing both technical solutions and community-based resilience strategies.

4. Success Stories: From Local Action to Systemic Impact

Several projects led by women have achieved **significant, measurable, and replicable** impacts across the 'Environment Programme's' priority areas. These success stories illustrate how **female leadership actively drives technical innovation, fosters community engagement, and delivers tangible environmental results**.



Innovation in the Circular Economy

Women-led projects have introduced **biodegradable fishing nets** and **sustainable packaging solutions**, accelerating the adoption of circular models across different industries and territories.

Biosphere Reserves

Under female leadership, conservation initiatives have **effectively integrated local communities**, enhanced governance models, and promoted the sustainable management of natural resources.

Climate Resilience

Locally tailored adaptation strategies — **co-designed with stakeholders** — have enabled municipalities to prepare for extreme weather events, reinforcing inclusive and robust responses to climate risks.

Project Highlights

Biosphere Reserves: Sustainable Territories, Resilient Communities

This project enhances the value of Portuguese Biosphere Reserves by **showcasing their ecosystem services and cultural heritage**. It focuses on **capacity building and governance improvements**, empowering communities to lead sustainable territorial development.

+SOIL+LIFE

An innovative pilot initiative addressing **climate change and desertification** in the Vale do Guadiana. It promotes **agroforestry and regenerative land use**, supporting farmers through participatory methods and local governance structures — ensuring long-term environmental and social sustainability.

“Oeste + Recicla”

This initiative advances the circular economy through **local recycling systems and efficient waste management** in the Oeste region. With direct impact on **waste reduction** and **environmental awareness**, it exemplifies how **female leadership effectively translates sustainability goals into regional action**.

Outputs and Results

Quantitative indicators confirm what case studies suggest: women-led projects are delivering well beyond expectations.

These success stories are reflected in some of the **Programme’s most outstanding output indicators**. Among the 14 women-led projects, many not only met their goals — they exceeded them:

- **Use of secondary materials** in supported sectors rose to **100%**, far surpassing the 15% target
- **133 voluntary schemes** were launched to reduce marine plastic littering — well above the original target of 3
- **300 professionals** were trained to manage Biosphere Reserves — **12 times more** than the planned 24

These figures are not coincidental — they are the result of **visionary leadership, strategic collaboration, and inclusive planning**. The success of women-led projects lies in their ability to combine **scientific rigor with empathy**, to foster **participatory governance**, and to build bridges between innovation and local needs.

By translating strategy into action, these women are not only implementing environmental projects — they are **shaping pathways to systemic change**.

5. Geographical and Intervention Area

Women's leadership in the 'Environment Programme' is clearly manifested in the territory. The 14 projects led by women are spread from the north to the south of Portugal, including the islands, covering urban municipalities, coastal areas, rural areas and regions of high ecological sensitivity, such as Biosphere Reserves.

This territorial scope reveals not only the geographical diversity of the action, but also the leaders' ability to adapt sustainable solutions to different local contexts. From the deep interior of Barrancos to the outermost regions of the Azores and Madeira, these projects incorporate technical knowledge and community dialogue, contributing to an inclusive ecological transition anchored in the territories.

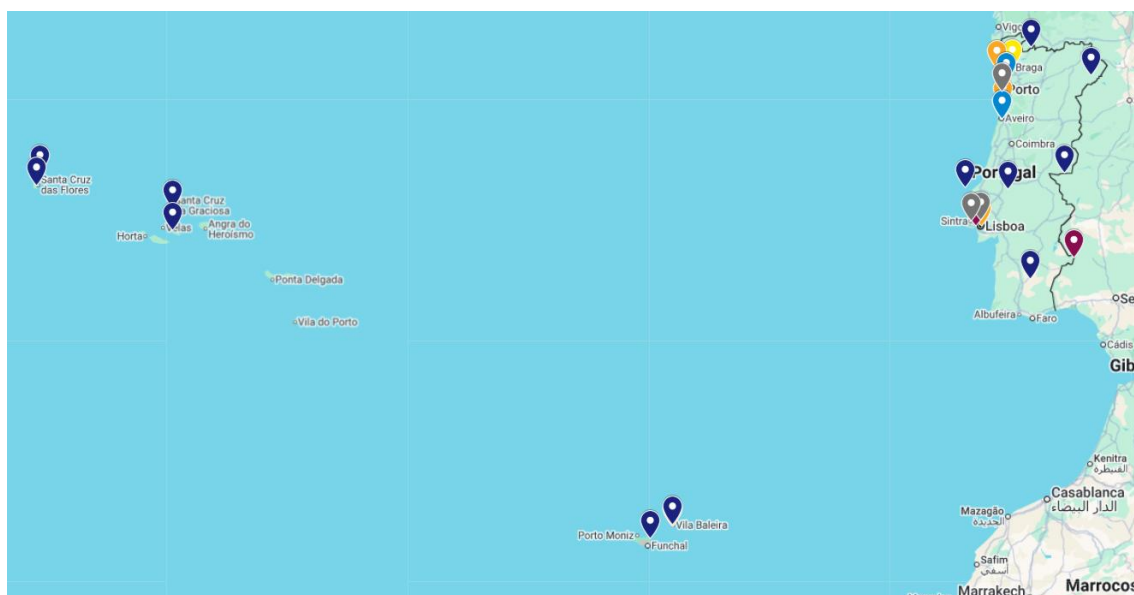
From a thematic point of view, the projects cover all of the Programme's strategic areas:

- 9 projects promote the circular economy, namely in the construction, deposit system and marine waste sectors;
- 1 project works to valorise the territory, through the 12 Biosphere Reserves;
- 4 projects contribute to climate resilience, including risk adaptation and decarbonisation.







This data is now complemented by two visual tools that reinforce the reach and relevance of women's leadership:

- A geographical map with the location of the projects;
- A thematic table with the distribution by areas of intervention.

Map of Mainland Portugal and Islands with Geographical Identification of Projects



Thematic table with the distribution of intervention areas:

Thematic Area	No. of Projects
 Territorial Enhancement (Biosphere Reserves)	1
 Decarbonisation - Adaptation to Climate Change	2
 Circular Economy - Reduction of Marine Waste	4
 Circular Economy - Construction Sector	2
 Circular Economy - Deposit and Return System	2
 Decarbonisation - Living Laboratories	3

Both highlight the role of women in bringing innovation and environmental impact to the most diverse regional contexts, reflecting their strategic vision and capacity for systemic transformation.

6. Financial Execution

The 14 projects led by women under the ‘Environment Programme’ demonstrate **strong financial and physical execution**, highlighting not only effective project design but also excellent implementation capacity.

Key financial figures for the 14 projects led by women:

- **Total Investment:** €8,246,677.56
- **Financial Execution:** €7,832,830.50 (Average 95.77%)

- **Approximate Average Physical Execution:** 94.21%
- **Next Mechanism:** The future funding cycle should aim for gender parity; to increase project promoters and team leader led by a woman; prefer more women in consortia with a background in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

These figures confirm that projects led by women are not only impactful but also **efficient and well-managed**, achieving results in line with — or exceeding — the Programme's overall performance standards.

Comparative Overview:

	Total Amount Project (€)	Project Grant (€) (85%)	Financial Execution %	Physical Execution %
Projects Led by Women	8 246 678 €	7 171 024 €	95%	94%
Projects Led by Women with Donor Countries	5 652 623 €	5 302 931 €	94%	91%
Total Payment to Projects	27 091 915 €	23 558 187 €	91%	96%
% Projects Led by Women	30%			

In terms of team composition, the gender balance is notable:

	Total Project	Team	Men in the team	Women in the team
Total Eligible Applicants	161	1706	824	882

This data reinforces the importance of setting **clear gender equality targets** in the next funding cycle. Women have demonstrated not only leadership but also **outstanding execution capabilities**, making a strong case for greater inclusion in future mechanisms.

Additional information on team composition and applicant demographics is available in the project documentation.

These results do not emerge by chance — they reflect coherent strategies, strong project design, and inclusive leadership practices. To better understand how these outcomes were achieved and what they reveal about the dynamics of gender, innovation and impact, the next section outlines the methodology behind this analysis, grounded in the logic of the **Theory of Change** adopted by the external ex-post evaluation of the 'Environment Programme'.

7. Methodology

This article takes a mixed-methods approach to exploring the role of women in promoting sustainability under the “Environment Programme” (EEA Grants Portugal). Based on the principles of the Theory of Change, the analysis assumes that significant impact results from a combination of strategic planning, stakeholder engagement and inclusive leadership.

The methodology is structured as follows:

Document Review

A comprehensive analysis of official programme documentation, project reports, websites (e.g., eeagrants.gov.pt), and partner communication materials were carried out. This enabled the extraction of both quantitative and qualitative data related to project performance, leadership composition, and thematic focus.

Case Study Selection

From the 60 projects funded, 14 were identified as being led by women, based on the gender of the project’s primary representative. Among these, specific case studies were selected using criteria such as:

- Geographic and sectoral diversity
- Degree of innovation
- Thematic relevance to the Programme’s outcomes
- Replicability and potential for scale

These case studies provide a grounded view of the **contributions, processes, and outcomes** associated with female leadership.

Data Analysis

Quantitative indicators — such as financial and physical execution rates, key performance targets, and output metrics — were analysed using descriptive statistics. In parallel, qualitative insights were drawn from evaluations, public presentations, and interviews, capturing the **relational and strategic dimensions** of leadership and decision-making.

Analysis of Geographical and Thematic Distribution

To complement the analysis, a specific assessment was made of the geographical distribution of women-led projects in Portugal, including the mainland and the islands (Azores and Madeira). This analysis involved plotting the locations of the projects to visualise their territorial scope. In addition, projects were broken down by thematic areas of intervention, as detailed in section 5, to illustrate the diversity and strategic relevance of female leadership in different environmental sectors. This approach made it possible to understand how female leadership manifests itself in different local contexts and contributes to the ecological transition at a national level.

Contextual Integration

Findings were interpreted considering relevant European and international frameworks, including:

- **SDG 5** (Gender Equality)
- **SDG 13** (Climate Action)
- **The European Green Deal**
- **The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**

This contextual framing ensures that the analysis reflects not only the Programme's internal results, but also its **contribution to systemic change and policy alignment** at national and European levels.

By combining multiple sources of evidence, this article offers a holistic and strategic view of how women's leadership supports innovation, inclusion, and sustainability in environmental governance.

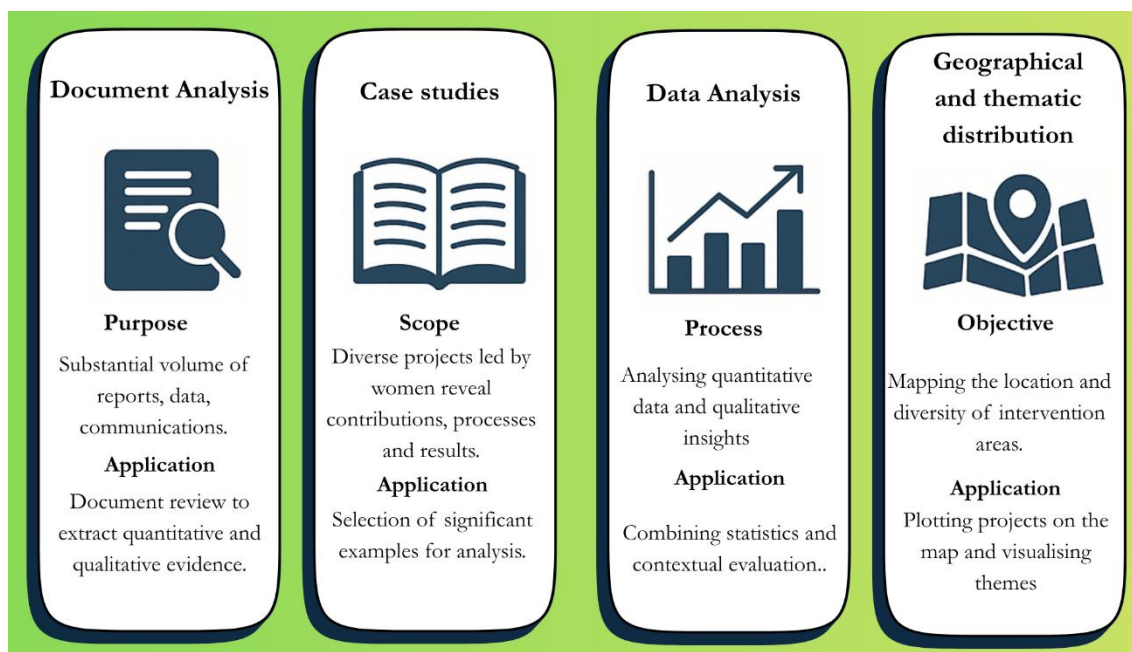
Before presenting the methods used in this study, it is important to delimit two concepts that are central to its understanding: inclusive leadership and sustainability.

Inclusive leadership is understood as the ability to actively involve different voices, experiences and identities in the decision-making process, promoting collaborative, equitable environments that are open to diversity. In this context, it is associated with the effective participation of women in coordination and decision-making positions in projects with an environmental and social impact.

The concept of sustainability, meanwhile, is approached from an integrated perspective, linking the environmental, social and economic dimensions, in line with the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Summary of the Methodological Approach:



8. Concrete Measures to Increase Female Participation in the 6th Funding Period 2021-2028:

To build on the success of women-led projects in the current cycle, the next funding period should adopt targeted actions that promote gender inclusion as a catalyst for innovation and sustainability.

Recommended Measures

- **Set gender-specific participation targets** in future calls and evaluation criteria
- **Establish mentoring programmes** for women in the environmental sector, particularly in leadership and technical roles
- **Develop financial incentives** for projects led by women or featuring gender-transformative approaches

These measures by empowering key actors — in this case, women in leadership — the Programme activates transformative pathways for inclusive and systemic sustainability outcomes.

International Inspiration

Countries such as **Norway** have introduced policy incentives that resulted in a significant increase in women leading environmental projects. These cases demonstrate that **gender equity is not only a matter of justice — it is a driver of innovation and impact.**

Strategic and Policy Alignment

These recommendations are directly aligned with major global and European frameworks:



UN SDG 5: Promote gender equality



UN SDG 13: Advance in climate action

EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025: Highlights the need for balanced participation of women in science, innovation, and environmental sustainability

Evidence from Thought Leadership

Several international reports reinforce the strategic value of women's leadership in sustainability:

- UNFCCC – “Gender and Climate Change”: Explores the positive impact of women’s participation in environmental policy
- UNEP – “The Role of Women in the Green Economy”: Highlights how women are driving sustainable solutions globally

Case Studies in Circular Innovation

Drawing from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's work, the following examples illustrate how circular economy solutions — many involving female leadership — generate both environmental and social value:

1. **Circular Packaging Design**
 - Example: Refillable or reusable cosmetic packaging
 - **Impact:** Less plastic waste, new service-based business models
2. **Circular Textiles and Fashion**
 - Example: Start-ups led by women creating collections from textile waste
 - **Impact:** Lower carbon footprint, sustainable fashion innovation
3. **Regenerative Agriculture**
 - Example: Urban food cooperatives with strong female leadership
 - **Impact:** Restored soil health, improved food sovereignty

4. Innovation in Materials

- Example: Women-led start-ups developing bioplastics
- **Impact:** Reduced fossil dependence and marine pollution

5. Circular Buildings and Construction

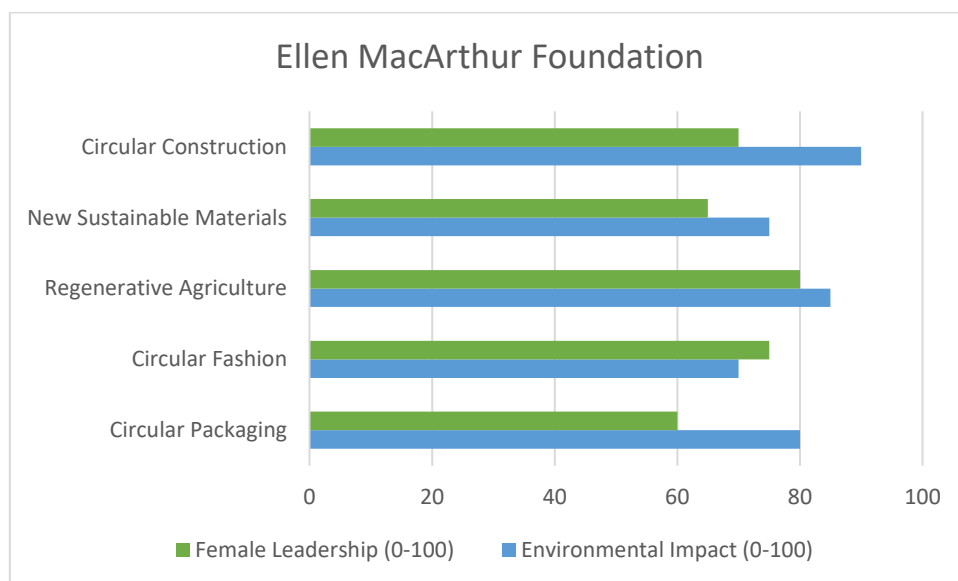
- Example: Pilot projects in universities and municipalities integrating circular design
- **Impact:** Less construction waste, greater resource efficiency

Why Gender Matters in Circular Innovation

Although the Ellen MacArthur Foundation does not always disaggregate data by gender, there is growing evidence of women's presence in:

- Product and process innovation
- Community-led sustainability models
- Green entrepreneurship and start-up leadership

Their inclusion brings **diverse perspectives, collaborative decision-making, and inclusive design** — all critical to scaling circular economic solutions with lasting impact.



9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The data presented in this article confirms that women's leadership is an essential factor for environmental innovation, community resilience and the alignment of public policies with contemporary challenges. From circular economy solutions to biodiversity protection and climate change adaptation, the projects led by women under the “Environment Programme” have produced **high-impact results**, with solid execution, territorial focus and **inclusive approaches**.

The absence of direct testimonies from women leaders limits the more human and experiential dimension of this analysis. However, the available data demonstrates the relevance of their strategic vision, capacity for territorial mobilisation and commitment to inclusive practices. Integrating women's voices into qualitative programme evaluation processes should be considered as a future methodological priority, in order to give centrality to the lived experience and narratives of transformation that these leaders represent.

To ensure that these results are sustained and extended in the next funding cycle, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recognition and Visibility

- **Acknowledge the fundamental role of women** in shaping sustainability strategies and delivering transformative outcomes
- Celebrate female-led success stories and **integrate gender-sensitive indicators** in programme evaluations

Structural and Policy Measures

- **Set clear targets** for female participation in future calls for proposals and assessment criteria
- **Ensure gender sensitivity** in project design, monitoring, and reporting
- **Incorporate gender equity goals** in strategic planning at both national and transnational levels

Capacity Building and Partnerships

- **Create dedicated mentoring and training programmes** for women in environmental leadership, science and innovation
- Strengthen **strategic partnerships** between public and private sectors and civil society organizations to grow networks of women leaders

Alignment with International and European Agendas

- Take inspiration from countries like **Norway and Germany**, where incentive policies have led to increased female leadership in green innovation
- Align with the **UN SDGs** (notably SDG 5 and SDG 13) and the **European Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**, positioning gender equity as an accelerator for climate action and the green transition

By embracing gender equity as a foundational pillar of sustainability, the ‘Environment Programme’ does more than empower individuals — it **builds resilient systems, inspires future policies, and sets a European benchmark** for inclusive, impactful environmental governance.

Together, let us transform leadership, amplify innovation, and build a **greener and more equitable future** — for all.

By recognizing and empowering the role of women in environmental sustainability, we not only promote equality, but we also accelerate impact. The sustainable future we aspire to depends on diverse, inclusive leadership that is strategically aligned with the challenges of our time.

It's time to make gender equity an explicit priority in all environmental funding in Europe.

Bibliography and Data Sources

- Data from the ‘Environment Programme’ – Information on the 60 funded projects, including 14 led by women, and quarterly reporting documents
- Ellen MacArthur Foundation – <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org>
- UNFCCC – <https://unfccc.int>
- United Nations ‘Environment Programme’ (UNEP) – <https://www.unep.org>
- European Commission – Gender Equality – https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality_en
- World Economic Forum – <https://www.weforum.org>
- Green Economy Coalition – <https://www.greeneconomycoalition.org>
- Global Gender and Climate Alliance (GGCA) – <https://www.gender-climate.org>