

From Pinkwashing to Real Female Empowerment in SMEs: The Recognition of Invisible Capital in Women-Centred Craftsmanship in Italy

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Abstract

In Southern Italy, gender gap rendered generations of women “invisible”. This paper explores the “Fabbrica Diffusa” model as a contemporary hub for social innovation and territorial recovery focusing on women aged 40–50 with limited formal education, alongside elderly and migrant women, where the silent dialogue of manual skills bridges linguistic, age and cultural barriers. By utilizing mentoring from elderly women and Prior Learning Recognition, the model converts manual craftsmanship into measurable economic assets, showing its empowering potential on local socio-economic fabrics and the most vulnerable targets.

Departing from mass production, digital environments enable slow, short supply chain, on-demand women-centred production systems, eliminating fixed costs of traditional markets targeting high-end niche markets loyal to strong ethical visions, value narrative and stories behind soulful products. This approach increases income and expenditures in consumer economy, such as higher investment in education and entrepreneurship, thus driving social mobility and reducing northward migration for second generations. For highly educated women, this may be a value-based choice for life-balance and entrepreneurial passion, dismantling centuries of patriarchal logics turning ancient matriarchal patterns into modern economic models.

Such virtuous isomorphism generates wealth and social cohesion with consistent spillover effects. Far from being only a pinkwashing facade, sustainability becomes a constitutive business component that transforms vulnerability into a value balance-sheet entry. To operationalize this vision, the study applies Social Return on Investment and the Wealth Economy Framework including satellite accounting systems in the UN SEEA, advancing economic theory by demonstrating that social value is a tangible economic stock.

Keywords: Fabbrica Diffusa, Female Entrepreneurship Sustainability, SROI, Wealth Economy Framework, UN SEEA, Intergenerational Retention, Prior Learning Recognition