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Learning & Innovating Together

Good Practice

Women with Disabilities in Digital and Tech

Building digital skills and career routes for women and girls with disabilities

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

1 Easy-to-read summary

What this document is about

This document explains:

- how women and girls with disabilities take part in digital and technology jobs,
- what problems they face in education and work,
- what policies exist to support them, and
- examples of good practices from organisations and companies.

Women with disabilities often face double discrimination: **because they are women and because they have a disability**.

What we know today

Digital skills and education

- Many people with disabilities leave school early.
- Women with disabilities usually stay in school longer than men with disabilities.
- Still, young people with disabilities have fewer chances to continue studying or find a job.
- Not many women study Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Work and the digital labour market

- Today most jobs require digital skills.
- Many people with disabilities cannot access or learn these skills easily.
- Employment rates are much lower for women with disabilities than for men with disabilities or women without disabilities.

Women with disabilities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics:

- Women are under-represented in Information Communications and Technology jobs and Artificial Intelligence development.
- There is very little specific data about women with disabilities in tech.
- Some studies show that when women with disabilities complete higher education, they participate more in Science and Technology jobs than men with disabilities.

Barriers women with disabilities face

Barriers linked to disability

- Schools often lack accessible learning materials.
- Teachers may not know how to include students with disabilities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects.
- Universities may not provide the right support or accommodations.
- It is harder for graduates with disabilities to find Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics jobs.
- Workplaces may also lack accessible equipment, flexible rules, or understanding.

Barriers linked to gender

- Girls are often told—directly or indirectly—that "Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics is for boys".
- Women may lack confidence in their Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics abilities.
- They face sexism, harassment, or exclusion.
- Women have more difficulties finding mentors, internships, and leadership roles.
- They are still paid less than men.

Combined (intersectional) barriers - Women with disabilities often say:

- It is hard to know if discrimination comes from their gender, disability, or both.
- They feel isolated and lack role models.
- They often need to explain their needs again and again.
- Many do not feel safe to disclose disabilities.
- They must work harder to "prove" they belong in tech.

Policies that exist

Many policies support women, people with disabilities, or digital skills, **but very few address women with disabilities specifically.**

Key frameworks include:

- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: protects rights to education and work.
- EU Gender Equality Strategy.

- EU Digital Education Action Plan.
- EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- Europe's Digital Decade (goal: more women and more people with disabilities in digital jobs).
- Union of Skills and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Education Strategic Plan (focus on girls).

These policies recognise gender gaps and disability rights but **do not yet combine both issues**.

What service providers can do

Service providers across Europe use different approaches:

- Some offer special programmes for women with disabilities in tech.
- Others support all people with disabilities and adapt to each person's interests.

Example: RADIA Programme (Spain) – A training programme for women with disabilities, offering:

1. Digital transformation basics
2. Specialisation (AI & Data or Cybersecurity)
3. Real work experience with paid internships

60% of participants improve their jobs or start new careers.

What companies are doing

Global initiatives

- The ILO Global Business and Disability Network works with companies to improve disability inclusion.
- The WomenTech Network supports women in tech and gives visibility to disability inclusion.

Company actions

- Appointing accessibility and diversity leaders (e.g., Microsoft, SAP).
- Hiring programmes for people with disabilities or neurodivergent people (Microsoft, SAP, SAS, Orange).
- Programmes to recruit more women in tech (e.g., Orange's "Hello Women").
- Employee groups for women and people with disabilities.

Main conclusions

- Women with disabilities are greatly underrepresented in tech and digital fields.
- They face multiple barriers in education and work.
- Policies exist, but they rarely consider disability and gender together.
- Good practices show that targeted support works—especially mentoring, accessible education, and inclusive hiring.
- More data, more awareness, and more action are needed to support these women in digital and tech careers.

2 Introduction

In recent years, increased efforts have been made at the EU-level to promote the participation of women and girls in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). However, such policies miss a nuanced approach when it comes to girls and women with disabilities. Women and girls with disabilities experience the intersection of gender inequality and disability exclusion, which not only can compound issues experienced by both groups, but create different barriers and new forms of discrimination due to their combination[1].

The European Platform for Rehabilitation, as a European Network of service providers for people with disabilities, fosters an environment for members to innovate and learn together about trends in services addressed to persons with disabilities, working to improve service quality and responding to specific needs.

In meetings of the Digital Skills Working Group throughout 2025, EPR members discussed the topic of women and girls with disabilities in tech and digital professions, and members shared good practices. EPR members noted the lack of data and initiatives specifically addressing the barriers experienced by women and girls with disabilities in this sector.

In this paper, EPR aims to shed light on the experiences of women and girls with disabilities in digital and tech professions. The paper firstly provides a state of play of women and girls with disabilities in digital and tech professions, delving into existing literature on women and girls with disabilities in this sector, and, due to the limited amount of research, also analyses, separately, the barriers of women and of persons with disabilities in digital and tech. Then, the paper delves into EU-level policies that may address the barriers experienced by women and girls with disabilities in the digital and tech sector. After that, the paper explores service providers' roles in supporting women and girls with disabilities in digital and tech professions and introduces a member's good practice. Finally, the paper presents tech company practices that foster the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities in tech and digital professions.

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[1] UN Women, Policy Paper *30 years of Beijing Platform for Action: An intersectional approach to gender and disability inclusion*, pages 4-5, 2025, available here.

3 Women with disabilities in the tech and digital sector in Europe and globally – state of play

Due to a lack of specific data at the EU level and globally about the presence of women with disabilities in the tech and digital sectors, the first section of this report analyses existing data about the qualifications and digital skills of women with disabilities, the impact of the digitalisation of the labour market for women with disabilities, the presence of women in STEM. It then reflects on the impact of the intersection of disability and gender in these sectors.

3.1 Qualifications and digital skills of persons with disabilities

Data shows how persons with disabilities start from a disadvantageous position when entering the labour market, with a lower proportion of jobseekers with higher qualifications. Women with disabilities tend to stay in education for longer than men with disabilities, and there is a similar use of digital technologies between women and men with disabilities.

As noted by the 2025 Joint Employment Report[2], people with disabilities are more likely to leave school early. A report by EASNIE[3] notes that this is due to risk factors at the individual level, e.g. poor academic performance, absenteeism; socio-economic background; the school system, the lack of reasonable accommodation; and discrimination and limited accessible vocational pathways. When disaggregated by gender, it is interesting to note that, in 2022, **less women with disabilities were early school leavers compared to young men with disabilities** (14.1% and 25.5% respectively)[4].

In 2022, the number of young persons with disabilities that were not in education or employment (27.3%) is also higher than for young persons without disabilities (12%)[5]. **The number of NEET young women with disabilities was lower than the number of NEET men with disabilities** (24.9% and 30% respectively), a situation that reversed among persons without disabilities (14% of women, and 10.1% of men)[6].

According to the European Commission[7], only 35% of persons with disabilities aged 30-34 have completed tertiary or equivalent education, while this figure was 46.6% for persons without disabilities. Interestingly, **more women with disabilities aged 30-34 completed tertiary education** than men with disabilities from this range, the rates being 40.5% and 30.3% respectively[8].

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[2] European Commission, Council of the EU, Report *Joint Employment Report 2025*, 2025, available here

[3] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Report *Early School Leaving: Literature Review*, 2016, available here.

[4] European Commission, Report *European comparative data on persons with disabilities: Equal opportunities, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion – analysis and trends: data 2022*, page 47, 2025, available here.

[5] Idem, page 54

[6] Idem, page 55

[7] Idem, page 61

[8] Idem, page 62.

Although no concrete data on the digital skills of persons with disabilities is available, the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ESRPD)[9] underlined that only 64.3% of persons with disabilities over the age of 16 have internet connection at home, compared to 87.9% of those without disabilities. **2024 Eurostat[10] data shows that 78.2% of people in the EU aged 16-74 with severe disability used the internet regularly, while this was the case for 86% of persons with moderate disability, and 93.5% for those without disability, with very narrow gender gaps in all groups.**

3.2   Persons with disabilities in a digital labour market

A European Disability Forum (EDF) report[11] underscored that **92% of the positions in the current job market require digital skills, which implies that those who lack such digital skills will only be able to access a smaller pool of job posts**. The possibilities brought by new technologies are open exclusively to employees and employers able to adapt to them.

Persons with disabilities experience many hurdles on their path to employment in an increasingly digital labour market. They lead to lower employment rates, in particular for women with disabilities. According to the European Commission[12], in 2022, while 76.3% of persons without disabilities between 20-64 in the EU were in employment, only 54.3% of persons with disabilities in that age range were employed. **Moreover, there was a gender employment gap for women with disabilities, with only 51.03% of them in employment compared to 58.1% of men with disabilities[13]**. While women and girls with disabilities in the EU participate more and for longer periods in education than men with disabilities, they still experience lower employment rates. This can indicate that there are limitations in the available pathways from education to employment of women with disabilities.

As described in an EESC opinion[14], low levels of digital skills and the digitalisation of the labour market, together with the substitution of low-value jobs by Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions risks increasing the socio-economic exclusion of persons with disabilities if the digital gap is not closed.

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[9] European Commission, Communication *Union of Equality: The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030*, 2021, available here.

[10] Eurostat, News article *Disabled people less likely to be internet users*, 2025, available here.

[11] European Disability Forum, Report *DATA Project – Summary Report*, 2024, available here.

[12] European Commission, Report *European comparative data on persons with disabilities: Equal opportunities, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion – analysis and trends: data 2022*, page 85, 2025, available here.

[13] Idem, page 86.

[14] European Economic and Social Committee, Opinion *Including persons with disabilities in the development of new technologies and AI – possibilities, challenges, risks and opportunities*, 2025, available here.

3.3 Women with disabilities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

Recent EU data included in the Union of Skills Communication[15] shows the low level of enrolment of women in STEM-related education:

- The share of women enrolled in STEM fields in initial medium-level VET (out of the total STEM enrolment) was 16.1% in 2022.
- The share of women enrolled in STEM fields at tertiary level (out of the total STEM enrolment) was 31.8% in 2022.

Gender balance, defined as both women and men representing between 40% and 60%, is observed among Doctoral graduates in most EU Member States. According to the European Commission's SheFigures 2024 data[16], women represent 48% of Doctoral graduates at the EU level. However, when data is broken down by broad field of study, significant disparities persist. **In most Member States, women represent the majority (over 60%) of Doctoral graduates in Education but are underrepresented (less than 40%) in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction**.

Women are underrepresented in the Tech sector, including in ICT occupations and in AI development. **In the G20 countries, ICT is a heavily male dominated field,** with men composing 71% of graduates[17]. At the global level, women represent only 28% of the tech industry workforce worldwide and only 20% of the leadership positions[18]. In the **EU, only 1 in 3 STEM graduates and 1 in 5 ICT specialists are women[19]**. Between 2014 and 2024, **the percentage of women working in ICT has not changed much, increasing from 16.2% to 19.5% of ICT specialists in employment[20]**.

While the extent of AI talent[21] has increased sixfold between 2016 and 2022, **the percentage of women considered AI talent in 2022 was approximately 30%, roughly 4 percentage points higher than it was in 2016[22]**. The presence of women in the industries with the highest concentration of AI talent shows to be higher in some of them: Education (female representation of 40%), Consumer Services (38%), and Government and Public Sector (35%). Women's AI talent is lower in other sectors, such as Professional services (31%), Financial Services (28%); Technology, Information, and Media (25%), and

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[15] European Commission, Communication *The Union of Skills*, 2025, available here.

[16] European Commission, Webpage *She Figures 2024*, n.d., available here.

[17] UNESCO, Report *Changing the equation: securing STEM futures for women*, page 24, 2024, available here.

[18] Idem, page 38

[19] European Commission, Webpage *Women in Digital – Shaping Europe's digital future*, n.d., available here.

[20] Eurostat, Webpage *ICT specialists in employment – Statistics Explained*, 2025, available here.

[21] The "AI talent concentration" metric used in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (available here) is determined "by comparing the number of AI professionals to the total number of LinkedIn members worldwide. An individual is considered AI talent if they have explicitly listed AI skills on their profile and/or works in a job classified as an AI occupation. The concentration of AI talent is then calculated by taking the ratio of the number of AI talent by the number of LinkedIn members in that industry."

[22] World Economic Forum, Report *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*, page 46, 2023, available here.

Manufacturing (22%)[23]. With regards to AI engineering skills, data indicates that the share of LinkedIn members who list AI engineering skills between 2018-2025 has rapidly expanded, but across that period, men have a higher share than women listing AI engineering skills: from 0.1% of women and 0.3% of men in 2018, to 1.1% of women and 2.0% of men in 2025[24].

Looking at specific data for women with disabilities, there is a lack of data on the level of enrolment of women with disabilities in STEM-related education. Data gaps exist as well on the proportion women with disabilities represent within doctoral graduates at the EU level, specifically in fields such as ICT or engineering. There is also a lack of disaggregated data of the presence of women with disabilities in the science and technology workforce.

The She Figures 2024 Study[25] reports that women with disabilities that have completed tertiary education are more likely to be employed in the Science and Technology field than men with disabilities with the same level of education. At EU level, in 2022, tertiary-educated women with some disability (74 %) and tertiary-educated women with severe disability (67 %) are more likely to be employed in the Science and Technology field than the equivalent populations of men (65 % and 63 %, respectively). This study also underlines **how tertiary-educated women some disability were more likely to work in the Science and Technology field than women who are not limited at all in 11 EU Member States**. In contrast, men without disability are more likely to work in Science and Technology. The report does not go further as to why tertiary-educated women with some disability are more likely to work in the Science and Technology field.

3.4 Barriers for women with disabilities in tech and digital education and work: Intersection of disability and gender

In order to fully understand the situation of women with disabilities in digital and tech professions, it is key to consider what intersectional[26] barriers related to disability and gender they experience when building their skills and careers in the sector.

Disability-related barriers

Barriers in Primary and Secondary education

At **school some children and young persons with disabilities face specific challenges** when completing technology-related school courses. It must be noted that the information found focuses on particular groups of children and young people with disabilities, notably students with mild disabilities and students with special education needs (both defined below), which implies knowledge gaps regarding children and young persons with other types of disabilities, such as, for example, physical and sensorial ones.

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[23] Idem, page 46.

[24] World Economic Forum, White Paper *Gender Parity in the Intelligent Age*, page 15, 2025, available here.

[25] European Commission, Report *She Figures 2024*, 2025, available here.

[26] Intersectionality is described by UN Women's Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit as recognizing *"that people's lives are shaped by their identities, relationships and social factors. These combine to create intersecting forms of privilege and oppression depending on a person's context and existing power structures such as patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, imperialism, homophobia and racism".*

According to the GAP analysis report from the SpicE project[27], students with mild disabilities[28] in the project partners' countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Spain) experience several barriers regarding their participation in STEAM[29] activities, including **students having experienced restrictive educational experiences and lack of prerequisite knowledge and skills**, and **teachers' insufficient knowledge and skills regarding how to include students with disabilities in STEAM education activities**. The report, however, notes that for students with mild disabilities there is evidence that, **if properly taught, they can present considerable progress**, and they may also benefit from their participation in STEAM education activities implemented in this context. However, such students are often excluded from such activities, do not receive the accommodations they need, or are asked to use the same means for accessing information as their pears without learning difficulties.

According to a report[30] from the EU-funded Explore your Abilities project[31], studying various aspects of STEAM education for students with special education needs[32] in Romania, Latvia and Cyprus, including the challenges such students face. Such challenges included:

- **Group work and collaboration** can be difficult due to short attention spans, learning styles and social anxiety.
- Understanding **abstract concepts** inherent in STEAM subjects can be a hurdle.
- Difficulty **connecting knowledge** acquired in different STEAM subjects.
- **Difficulties** in communication, understanding instructions, concentrating on tasks and **completing assignments** can hinder learning.
- **Learning disabilities** like dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia can create obstacles in accessing and understanding information. Autistic students may have unique challenges engaging with tasks depending on their interests.
- **Low frustration tolerance** in autistic students and students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or anxiety can make trial-and-error learning, crucial to STEAM, challenging.
- **Difficult exposure to new environments** and exploration for students with special education needs who thrive in familiar routines.
- **Capturing and maintaining a student's attention** during activities can be a challenge.
- The **severity of intellectual disabilities** can significantly impact a student's ability to learn STEAM subjects.

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[27] SpicE Academy, Report *D2.1 GAP Analysis*, 2023, available here.

[28] Understood by the report as the population of students with Learning Disabilities, Mild Intellectual Disability, Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity and Mild Behavioral Problems.

[29] STEAM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics. According to a policy brief by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, STEAM education is often understood as STEM plus the arts. Some academics associate it with visual arts (painting, sculpture, and photography), while others adopt a broader definition encompassing performing arts, crafts, and expressive disciplines. In contrast, some advocate for integrating the liberal arts, social sciences, and humanities (SSH), along with other fields, into core STEM disciplines. To mark the integration of "all other subjects" into the STEM education framework, some stakeholders use the acronym STE(A)M education.

[30] Explore Abilities Consortium, Report *Survey Report*, 2025, available here.

[31] Explore Your Abilities Consortium, Webpage *Explore your abilities*, n.d., available here.

[32] Defined in the project as students with Anxiety, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity, Autism, Dyslexia, Down Syndrome, and Sensorial disabilities.

Teachers of STEAM subjects for students with special education needs also face **key barriers** in the three countries, including:

- Limited specialised training.
- Insufficient resources.
- Policy restrictions that affect the inclusion of students with disabilities in STEAM education.
- A shortage of appropriate teaching materials.

Tertiary education

Different US academic articles highlight the barriers experienced by **university students with disabilities pursuing STEM-related degrees**. It must be noted that the data in such articles is not disaggregated by type of disability. One article[33] underlines how **STEM instructors are less willing and/or less knowledgeable about how to support disabled students** through accommodations or course design. In particular, engineering instructors focus their accommodations on exams (e.g., extended time), while non-STEM instructors tend to favour formative accommodations (e.g., notetakers, proofreaders) and flexible learning objectives. This is due to a perception of other specific accommodations by instructors as less equitable.

Research[34] also points out that STEM degree requirements, often include a core set of courses and content that cannot be avoided, and in some departments, instructors who cannot be avoided, which implies a **lesser degree of flexibility**. Moreover, reputable STEM programs strive to ensure standardised reasoning and behaviour through tests, grades and exams where accuracy and completeness are fundamental, for instance, to "assure that bridges stand up and that artificial hearts perform reliably"[35]. However, this is done in a way that **already sets up which are the most valuable means of communication, pace of learning and the means to organise one's knowledge, oftentimes disregarding the needs of persons with disabilities**.

Due to this lack of cultural and structural flexibility, **undergraduate students with disabilities pursuing STEM fields have a lower likelihood of using accommodations** in their courses compared to those in non-STEM disciplines[36].

Labour Market

Persons with disabilities also experience **difficulties when entering the STEM labour market**. According to a study[37], in 2018-2019, STEM graduates in the UK with a known disability were more likely to be unemployed six months after graduation compared to those STEM leavers with no known disability. Furthermore, this study found that, in 2016-2017, STEM graduates with a social communication disorder and autistic graduates had the highest rate of unemployment six months after finishing their studies and the lowest percentage going into professional employment. When it comes

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[33] Ariel Chasen, Maura Borrego, Elisa Koolman, Emily Landgren, Hannah Chapman Tripp, *A systematic review of differences for disabled students in STEM versus other disciplinary undergraduate settings*, 2024, available here.

[34] Idem.

[35] Slaton, A. E., Conference Paper *Body? What Body? Considering Ability and Disability in STEM Disciplines*, 2013.

[36] Ariel Chasen, Maura Borrego, Elisa Koolman, Emily Landgren, Hannah Chapman Tripp, *A systematic review of differences for disabled students in STEM versus other disciplinary undergraduate settings*, 2024, available here.

[37] Royal Society, Report *Disability STEM data for students and academic staff in higher education*, 2021, available here.

to graduates of a first degree (e.g. bachelor's degree), after graduates with a social communication disorder and autistic graduates, the least likely to have a job after six months were people with a physical impairment or mobility issues, people with two or more conditions, graduates with a visual impairment, graduates with a mental health condition, and graduates with a hearing impairment[38]. At the postgraduate level, after graduates with a social communication disorder and autistic graduates, graduates with two or more conditions, with a physical impairment or mobility issues, with a mental health condition, with a visual impairment, or with another disability, impairment or medical condition were less likely to have a job after 6 months[39].

Additionally, when pursuing a career in academia in a STEM-related field, persons with disabilities experience specific **barriers** to success in the job, including[40]:

- Competitive research environments, with expectations of consistent high levels of research productivity.
- Difficulties in obtaining external research funding.
- Expectations of full-time working patterns.
- Challenges accessing necessary adjustments.

According to US research, **barriers in education and employment differ with regard to specific disabilities, and whether a someone belongs to other underrepresented groups** (e.g. low socioeconomic status)[41].

- Travelling to conferences can be more expensive for individuals who need to cover the salary or travel expenses of a personal assistant. Moreover, captioning and sign-language interpreting can be expensive accommodations, which makes some organisations reluctant to provide it.
- People with disabilities may sometimes not know what accommodations to ask for, and have needs that are not well understood or supported, making the process of advocating for accommodations more difficult. While some accommodations like a flexible work schedule, work-at-home options, periodic rest breaks and reduced stress are recommended for some people with disabilities, obtaining them may be difficult when employers only consider tangible accommodations, such as adapted office furniture, or accessible documents.
- The needs of persons with disabilities may also vary over time. "Should a faculty member or student limit her work to what her normal capacity is when feeling unwell, allowing for steady but lower effort?", researchers ask[42]. Accommodations may be necessary, either limiting a student or worker's capacity, or agreeing for them to work at normal capacity when they are feeling well and shifting their capacity when they are not.
- A lack of awareness of someone's own disability can also be a barrier. For instance, many people with chronic illness, or who acquire impairments later in life do not identify as having a disability, which results in a lack of access to advocacy and support resources of the disability community.

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[38] Idem, page 21.

[39] Idem, page 21.

[40] Julia P. Sarju, *Nothing About Us Without Us – Towards Genuine Inclusion of Disabled Scientists and Science Students Post Pandemic,* 2021, available here.

[41] Brianna Blaser, Cynthia Bennett, Richard E. Ladner, Sheryl E. Burgstahler, Jennifer Mankoff, Book Chapter *Perspectives of Women with Disabilities in Computing*, 2019, available here.

[42] Brianna Blaser, Cynthia Bennett, Richard E. Ladner, Sheryl E. Burgstahler, Jennifer Mankoff, Book Chapter *Perspectives of Women with Disabilities in Computing*, 169, 2019, available here.

Gender-related barriers

Primary, secondary and tertiary education

Throughout their studies, girls and women face a significant number of obstacles to engage with the STEM field, including personal factors, environmental factors and organisational factors[43]. These include the challenges experienced by girls and women in technology or digital fields.

Personal factors:

- Girls' confidence in STEM is negatively affected by peers, parents, teachers and school counsellors who hold or propagate **gender stereotypes** and bias in STEM[44]. For instance, women are often expected to assume caretaking roles, such as nursing or teaching careers, whereas men are expected to hold leadership positions, pursuing scientific, engineering, or business careers. This can deter women from pursuing STEM careers, perpetuating gender imbalances, and it even leads women to face rejection from STEM fields based on preconceived assumptions about their skills, limiting their professional opportunities.
- Women having a **low trust in themselves** that they will succeed and perform the tasks related to STEM fields affects their career choices[45]. This may be rooted in the barriers girls still experience in some countries regarding their right to education, leading to gaps and challenges in school which challenge girls' confidence in STEM subjects. Moreover, in 2021, one of the top challenges faced by female STEM students was the feeling that they do not have the required level to succeed[46].
- **Attitudes, motivation, and interest** are also crucial personal elements that influence learners' dispositions toward STEM. Due to gender stereotypes, it might be difficult for girls and women to recognise themselves someone that can be in the STEM sector[47].

Environmental factors:

- The **family and peer context** are additional factors that influence the STEM gender gap. For instance, parents with traditional gender beliefs might aim for their children's behaviour to adhere to common gender norms, while parents working in STEM occupations may have a great effect on their daughter's decision to pursue a STEM career[48].
- How women are **socialised to fulfil gender roles** also greatly contributes to the underrepresentation of women in STEM. For instance, from an early age, girls are often exposed to societal messages that suggest STEM subjects are more suited to boys, which undermines their pursuit of higher education and careers in these fields[49].

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[43] STE(A)M Ecologies Consortium, Report *Empowering Women and Girls in STEM: Bridging the Gender Gap in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*, 2025, available here.

[44] UNESCO, Report *Changing the equation: securing STEM futures for women*, page 18, 2024, available here.

[45] STE(A)M Ecologies Consortium, Report *Empowering Women and Girls in STEM: Bridging the Gender Gap in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*, page 4, 2025, available here.

[46] UNESCO, Report *Changing the equation: securing STEM futures for women*, page 28, 2024, available here.

[47] STE(A)M Ecologies Consortium, Report *Empowering Women and Girls in STEM: Bridging the Gender Gap in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*, page 5, 2025, available here.

[48] Idem, page 5.

[49] UNESCO, Report *Changing the equation: securing STEM futures for women*, page 18, 2024, available here.

Organisational factors:

- The role of **schools** is fundamental for the development of students, and curricula influence the choice of young girls in STEM subjects[50].
- **Teacher quality** regarding both their pedagogical competence and STEM subject technical expertise and curriculum content plays a key role in influencing girl's participation in STEM. Although teaching in primary and secondary education is dominated by women, the share of women declines at higher levels of education, particularly in STEM subjects[51]. Seeing and hearing about women in STEM from an early age can foster interest and confidence, broaden perspectives, combat stereotypes and change classroom dynamics.
- The **representation of male and female roles** in educational materials can directly or indirectly communicate that there are gender differences in students' STEM abilities. Many textbooks and learning resources continue to depict men in dominant roles as scientists and engineers, while women are underrepresented or shown in stereotypical, non-technical roles[52].

Employment

According to a UNESCO study[53], once women transition from studying into the labour market, they also experience certain barriers throughout their career:

- **The difficulty in envisaging clear career paths and finding internships** can be particularly discouraging for women who struggle to see how their education translates into career opportunities.
- **Sexism, harassment and gender-based violence**, create hostile environments that deter women from pursuing and remaining in STEM studies and careers. Academic performance is negatively affected by sexism and gender-based violence as a consequence of the stress and the decrease in self-confidence that these experiences create. Based on international surveys, 84% of women researchers reported having been victims of sexism at least once, and 49% of women scientists say they have experienced sexual harassment at work. In a 2022 survey in Europe, two out of three women working in universities and other research organisations had experienced gender-based violence.
- Women often face challenges in accessing necessary **resources**, such as funding, modern equipment and industry connections, which are crucial for practical learning and skill development as well as to facilitate access to the labour market.
- **Leadership roles in STEM are more likely to be held by men**: only 29% of the leaders of national science academies globally are women. 10% of Nobel Prizes in natural sciences have been awarded to women since 2011.
- Women in the sector also experience a **gender pay gap**. For the 10 G20 countries with data on the earnings in STEM occupations, women's pay was less than 85% of men's pay in eight countries.
- Men tend to focus less on **balancing their career aspirations with gendered family responsibilities**, such as caring for children and elderly family members.

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[50] STE(A)M Ecologies Consortium, Report *Empowering Women and Girls in STEM: Bridging the Gender Gap in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*, page 6, 2025, available here.

[51] UNESCO, Report *Changing the equation: securing STEM futures for women*, page 20, 2024, available here.

[52] Idem, page 19.

[53] UNESCO, Report *Changing the equation: securing STEM futures for women*, 2024, available here.

Intersection of gender and disability in the tech labour market

As highlighted in previous sections, barely any research or data exists on women with disabilities in the tech and digital sectors and their experiences. One article published by Cambridge University Press[54] does underline common experiences of women with disabilities in the US who are either enrolled in computing education or work in the computing sector.

Some participants in the study underlined that it was difficult for them to tell how different aspects of their identity affected their experiences, considering not only the factors of gender and disability, but others such as race. They mentioned the difficulty to tell what bias is triggered in people they encounter assuming only one is triggered at a time. **Others indicated that disability was a more prominent issue to them.**

When it comes to **barriers to participation,** the following were mentioned by the participating women:

- A sense of isolation due to a lack of peers with disabilities or role models.
- Low self-confidence or impostor syndrome, aggravated when others doubted their abilities, and dismissed the access barriers they encountered.
- The impact of gender on advocating for own needs: social conditioning made it hard to develop self-advocacy skills. Perceptions of being 'assertive' (confident) vs. being 'aggressive' (bossy and mean) was another difficulty.
- For many women with disabilities, disclosure was a concern, causing them to avoid telling their employers and colleagues about their disabilities.
- Women with disabilities experienced barriers linked to accommodations and advocacy, such as having to educate their co-workers about accommodations, or difficulties to get accommodations or assistive technology.
- They also experienced a lack of support or mentors to guide them in their education or employment pathways.
- Women who participated found difficulties in finding jobs or internships despite companies having diversity policies in place.
- They also underlined the pressure they felt to be exceptional at what they do to justify their presence in the field.

Some of the **sources of support and positive aspects of disability** that women with disabilities in the computing sector have experienced include:

- Disability services offered in education centres such as universities, as well as the support of faculty and staff in their departments, coworkers or managers, or organisations focused on broadening their participation.
- Many of the participating women also believed there were positive aspects of having a disability and studying or working in the field of computing. For instance, they mentioned their problem-solving abilities due to navigating the world with a disability, and being able to bring a unique perspective by being women with disabilities, therefore impacting their company's accessibility efforts positively, and preparing students in a unique way.

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[54] Brianna Blaser, Cynthia Bennett, Richard E. Ladner, Sheryl E. Burgstahler, Jennifer Mankoff, Book Chapter *Perspectives of Women with Disabilities in Computing*, 2019, available here.

4 What policies exist to promote women with disabilities in the tech and digital sectors?

This section analyses the existing policies at the European level that promote women with disabilities in the tech and digital sectors. An overarching trend that can be observed is that policies to promote gender equality do mention the need to overcome gender-related barriers for women to participate in tech and digital education and professions, and policies promoting digital skills and STEM education include actions and targets on the inclusion of women in the sector. In contrast, policies to promote the rights of persons with disabilities only mention in a general way the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the digital sector, and neither gender equality nor digital education policies address specifically the barriers experienced by women with disabilities in the digital and tech sector, which constitutes a policy gap.

4.1 United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)[55] is the first international, legally binding instrument setting minimum standards for rights of people with disabilities, and the first human rights convention to which the EU has become a party. The Convention entered into force in the EU on 22 January 2011, and all EU Member States have signed and ratified the convention[56].

Article 6 recognises that women with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination and calls governments to take measures to enable them to enjoy their full enjoyment of human rights. Article 24 recognises the rights of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination, and Article 27 sets the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others.

Therefore, signatory parties should work towards preventing any discrimination women with disabilities may experience when studying and working in tech and digital fields.

4.2 Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025) and Roadmap for Women's rights

The Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025)[57] presents policy objectives and actions to make significant progress by 2025 towards a gender-equal Europe. It underlines the need to overcome the gender gap in the ICT and digital sector through the Digital Education Action Plan. A new Gender Equality Strategy will be developed by early 2026.

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[55] United Nations, *UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)*, 2006, available here.

[56] European Commission, Webpage *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)*, n.d., available here.

[57] European Commission, Communication *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*, 2020, available here.

The Roadmap for women's rights (2025)[58] highlights the need for:

- systematic collection of sex-disaggregated data for planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating public policies, including digital policies and tools;
- designing and using digital tools mindful of gender equality, bias, and gender stereotypes;
- encouraging women and girls to acquire digital skills and competences, including in artificial intelligence;
- making the digital environment, including online platforms, a safe place for women and girls, in all their diversity, free from violence, sexism, hate speech, and harassment.

However, neither address the specific case of women with disabilities in technology or in digital.

4.3   Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)

The Digital education action plan (2021-2027)[59] was created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to future-proof Europe's education by setting out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe. It also strives to support adapting education and training systems of EU countries to the digital age.

Action 4 focuses on improving the connectivity of schools and making the most out of EU support regarding internet access, and purchase of digital equipment and e-learning applications, in particular for students and educators with disabilities.

Action 13[60] focuses on women's participation in STEM by supporting young female students in developing their digital and entrepreneurship competences.

As part of this action plan, two Council Recommendations on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training were adopted in November 2023[61][62]. The Council Recommendations call on EU countries:

- To take action to close the gender gap in the level of digital skills between female and male teachers;
- To promote diversity and a gender-balanced uptake and reduce any possible stereotype in the teaching and learning of informatics or computational thinking;
- To tackle gender bias in ICT and provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities for girls and women.
- To enhance efforts towards digital inclusion for persons with disabilities to increase the number and diversity of ICT professionals.

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[58] European Commission, Communication *A Roadmap for Women's Rights*, 2025, available here; European Commission, Annex *Declaration of principles for a gender-equal society* to the Communication *A Roadmap for Women's Rights*, 2025, available here.

[59] European Commission, Communication *Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age*, 2020, available here

[60] European Commission, Webpage *Women's participation in STEM studies and careers*, n.d., available here.

[61] Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training*, 2023, available here.

[62] Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training*, 2024, available here.

- To invest in high-quality, resilient and inclusive digital education and training which safeguards the accessibility of digital education content and technologies for learners and teachers with disabilities, and provides specialised equipment and solutions for learners with special educational needs.

4.4 EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)

The EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[63], published in 2021, underscores the importance of digital skills for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in a digitalizing world: "*Accelerated digital transformation and the green transition offer opportunities, using information and communication technology (ICT), artificial intelligence and robotics to design on-site and remote services tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities. Effective use of these technologies requires the removal of accessibility barriers for persons with disabilities and investing in their digital skills.*"

Regarding digital skills, the Strategy is complemented by the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), according to which Member States will be supported in securing assistive technologies and in providing an accessible digital learning environment and content.

4.5 EU Digital Decade

In 2021, the European Commission published the Communication "2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade", a strategy laying down the vision for a successful digital transformation of the European Union by 2030[64]. The EU Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030[65], set up in 2022, aims to guide Europe's digital transformation by setting up an annual cycle of cooperation between the European Commission and EU countries to achieve concrete targets and objectives for 2030.

One of these targets is to achieve 'a digitally skilled population and highly skilled digital professionals, with the aim of achieving gender balance, where:

- At least 80 % of those aged 16-74 have at least basic digital skills;
- At least 20 million ICT specialists are employed within the Union, while promoting the access of women to this field and increasing the number of ICT graduates

The Digital Decade aims to increase the number of digitally empowered and capable citizens, including those with disabilities, by ensuring that teachers are adequately trained, skilled and equipped to use technology effectively in teaching methods, and teach digital technologies to equip students to enter the labour market.

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[63] European Commission, Communication *Union of Equality: The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030*, 2021, available here.

[64] European Commission, *Staff Working Document on the policy programme: a path to the digital decade*, 2021, available here.

[65] European Commission, Webpage *Europe's Digital Decade: Digital Targets for 2030*, n.d., available here; European Commission, Webpage *Digital Decade Policy Programme*, n.d., available here.

According to the State of the Digital Decade 2025 report[66], the EU is still facing major challenges to harnessing the digital transformation for its productivity and competitiveness. Persistent shortages of ICT specialists are slowing progress towards the Digital Decade targets in key areas like AI, cybersecurity and semiconductors, compounded by a continuous gender imbalance among ICT specialists.

4.6   European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles

The European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles[67] commits Europe to seek a fair and inclusive digital transformation that leaves no one behind.

- Principle 2 on Solidarity and inclusion mentions achieving a gender balance as well as including persons with disabilities.

- Principle 4 on Digital education, training and skills includes the EU's commitment to promoting high-quality digital education and training, including the intention to bridge the digital gender divide.

4.7   Union of Skills, STEM Education Strategic Plan & Action Plan on Basic Skills

The **Union of Skills package**[68], published in 2025, is a plan created by the European Commission in order to increase the amount of skilled workers in the EU with the ultimate goal of enhancing competitiveness. In particular it is formed of 4 pillars:

1. Delivering higher levels of basic and advanced skills.
2. Providing opportunities for people to regularly update and learn new skills.
3. Facilitate recruitment by businesses across the EU.
4. Attracting, developing, and retaining top talent in the EU.

Within its 1st pillar, the Union of Skills included the following strategic target on enrolment to STEM to reduce the gender gap in the sector:

- the share of students enrolled in STEM fields in initial medium-level VET should be at least 45% with at least 1 out of every 4 students female.
- the share of students enrolled in STEM fields at tertiary level should be at least 32% , with at least 2 out of 5 students female.
- the share of students enrolled in ICT PhD programmes should be at least 5%28, with at least 1 out of every 3 students female.

Moreover, as part of the Union of Skills, the European Commission published the **STEM Education Strategic Plan[69]**, which aims to:

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[66] European Commission, Report *State of the Digital Decade 2025*, 2025, available here.

[67] European Parliament, Council of the European Union, European Commission, *European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade*, 2023, available here.

[68] European Commission, Communication *The Union of Skills*, 2025, available here.

[69] European Commission, Communication *A STEM Education Strategic Plan: skills for competitiveness and innovation*, 2025, available here.

- address gender stereotypes and make the areas of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) more appealing to girls and women;
- facilitate access to STEM education by targeting specific age groups and promoting mentorship programs with role models;
- modernise STEM education by incorporating interdisciplinary programs, creative problem-solving, and entrepreneurial skills.

As part of this Strategic Plan, the European Commission will launch initiatives such as:

- Girls go STEM (2025): a program to attract 1 million girls to STEM studies and professions by 2028;
- STEM futures (2026): an initiative to identify and share successful STEM education practices, with a focus on girls and women;
- European STEM week: an event to promote STEM education and reach out to young people, particularly girls and their families, in synergy with EU-funded projects such as the STEAMbrace (funded under Horizon Europe);
- STEM specialists fellowship: a pilot program to attract top international STEM experts to EU higher education and research institutions.

The Action plan on basic skills[70] proposes steps for the EU and Member States to improve basic skills and promote excellence from early years to school education and adult learning. One of the basic skills included are digital skills.

The Action Plan acknowledges that 'gender differences impact learning outcomes' and stresses that 'societal expectations and gender stereotypes can lead to gender differences in career expectations and influence subject-specific attitudes, motivation and academic performance'. It calls for 'gender sensitive teaching approaches'. It also notes that raising the overall basic skills levels is both about increasing top performance and about ensuring all learners, including those with disabilities, leave school with sufficient basic skills and that adults reach an adequate level of proficiency.

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[70] European Commission, Communication *Action Plan on Basic Skills*, 2025, available here.

5 Service providers' role in supporting women with disabilities in tech and digital professions

In discussions of the EPR Digital Skills Working Group, different trends could be identified regarding services supporting women with disabilities in tech and digital professions.

Members highlighted how for some of the courses and VET they offer, there is a clear gender divide, with more men attending IT and maintenance courses, in which a lack of women was notable, and women participating in other types of workshops, for instance, on sewing. In contrast, other members underlined increased progress in the involvement of women in digital skills trainings, being close to gender balance.

Approaches on how to support women and girls with disabilities to access digital and tech professions also differed. Some members offered specific programmes targeting women with disabilities in the tech sector, with targeted actions and support (see good practice below). Other members do not offer specific services targeting women with disabilities in the tech sector, but work with an approach of supporting persons with disabilities develop their interests implying that, if a woman with disabilities had the motivation to work in the tech sector, they would provide support to achieve this goal.

RADIA Technological Training Programme
Fundación ONCE (Spain)

In 2020, Fundación ONCE, together with the Conference of Social Councils of Spanish Universities (CCS), and the CEOE Foundation launched the **RADIA Program, a training program for women with disabilities, designed to foster their careers in the technological and digital sectors while tackling the underrepresentation of women in these traditionally male-dominated fields.**

The programme aims to promote gender equality in technology, enhance the employability of women with disabilities, and to contribute to building inclusive digital workplaces.

The RADIA programme is open not only to women with legally recognised disabilities who hold a university degree, but also to those who have earned a higher vocational training qualification. Candidates must have a commitment to attend live online masterclasses and be available to travel to Madrid for up to 4 in-person sessions. The selection process consists of a Digital Skills test and an on-line interview

The training is divided into three training phases:

- The first, named **Digital Transformation**, aims to enable students to acquire technological knowledge and skills to work in jobs in the digital economy over the course of 4 weeks, through eight masterclasses introducing emerging technologies.
- After this period, the **Specialisation Program** begins, lasting 17 weeks. In this phase, participants are supported and guided by experienced mentors, and obtain professional certifications in specific areas. For example, in 2025[71], the programme offered specialised training focused on two

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[71] Fundación ONCE, Webpage *Abierta la convocatoria de la VI edición del Programa RADIA de formación tecnológica para mujeres con discapacidad*, 2025, available here.

certifications: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Data, and Cybersecurity. Within these two specialisations, students can complete mandatory certifications and other voluntary ones that serve to increase their level in each of them.

- Finally, in the **Real Work** stage, lasting 13 weeks, participants complete paid internships in a real-life setting, applying the knowledge they have acquired to enhance their experiences and learning.

The RADIA Programme's 6th edition began recently, and in the past editions a total of 221 women with disabilities participated, 60% of which secured employment, improved their professional conditions or launched their own businesses. Moreover, the programme has fostered long-term partner engagement, especially with partnering companies offering internships to the programme participants.

More information available here and here (in Spanish).

6 Tech companies' initiatives for the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities

This section introduces international networks and organisational initiatives promoting the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities at work, and in particular in tech and digital professions. Notably, while specific networks and company-level initiatives aim to promote the inclusion of women and the inclusion of persons with disabilities (separately), there is a lack of initiatives promoting specifically women with disabilities in tech and digital professions.

ILO Global Business and Disability Network

The ILO Global Business and Disability Network[72] aims to create a global workforce culture that is respectful and welcoming for persons with disabilities. Its goal is to ensure that employment policies and practices in companies of all types are inclusive of people with disabilities around the world, as well as raising awareness about the positive relationship between disability inclusion and business success.

This network is a platform for business-to-business support and peer-to-peer learning on disability issues, facilitating the exchange of knowledge through global, regional and national meetings, working-groups, joint publications and tools. It also supports national-level initiatives on disability inclusion, particularly in developing countries, through technical advice and facilitating contacts with national businesses and disability initiatives, organisations of persons with disabilities, and ILO partners and offices.

The ten principles of the **ILO Global Business and Disability Network Charter**[73] include: Respect and promotion of rights, non-discrimination, equality of treatment and opportunities, accessibility, job retention, confidentiality, attention to all types of disabilities, collaboration, evaluation and knowledge-sharing. These provide a framework to help enterprises achieve business success while simultaneously creating equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

45 global companies and 48 national business and disability networks participate in the Network. Some of the Network's members are **tech and digital companies**, including[74] Accenture, Atos, Capgemini, Deloitte, IBM, Microsoft, Orange, Salesforce, and Tata Consultancy Services.

Womentech Network

WomenTech Network[75] is one of the world's leading communities for women in tech with more than 9,200 Global Ambassadors representing 179 countries.

WomenTech Network strives to empower women in tech through leadership development, professional growth, and mentorship programs. The Network also hosts regular career networking events and a

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[72] ILO Global Business and Disability Network, Webpage *Mission*, n.d., available here.

[73] ILO Global Business and Disability Network, Webpage *Charter*, n.d., available here.

[74] ILO Global Business and Disability Network, Webpage *Members*, n.d., available here.

[75] WomenTech Network, Webpage *Women in Tech Global | Women in Tech Network*, n.d., available here.

global tech conference for members to connect with like-minded professionals and learn about job opportunities at leading companies that value diversity.

In 2020, this network organised a **Disability Inclusion Award**[76] to give recognition to individuals championing people with disabilities in the tech sector.

Organisational-level initiatives

Businesses in the tech and digital sector have taken up different initiatives to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities and women.

Some organisations have set up **key leadership roles** promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities and women. For instance, Microsoft appointed Jenny Lay-Flurrie as Chief Accessibility officer[77]. Lay-Flurrie, who is deaf, leads the company's accessibility and disability efforts. Other organisations, such as SAP[78] appointed a chief diversity and inclusion officer, also in charge of ensuring the inclusion of people with disabilities in the company.

Some organisations have specific **hiring initiatives for persons with disabilities and neurodivergent people**, including Microsoft[79], through inclusive hiring for people with disabilities, as well as neurodiversity, and supported employment programmes; SAP[80], with an Autism at Work initiative; SAS[81], with an internship program for autistic people; and Orange[82], with a hiring policy based exclusively on competences, putting into value each candidate's talents and pathways.

Other organisations have also set up **hiring initiatives to promote women in tech**, such as Orange, with its "Hello Women" programme[83], aiming to encourage women in digital roles across the world.

Other organisational initiatives include **employee resource groups for persons with disabilities and for women.** For instance, Microsoft organised a Disability Employee Resource Group[84] representing employees with disabilities, their families and allies in order to increase visibility within the company, raise awareness of disability groups, and accessibility improvements in the work environment. Microsoft also has an employee resource group for women[85] to foster the inclusion, of all women, including women with disabilities.

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[76] WomenTech Network, Webpage *WomenTech Global Awards 2020 Winners: Disability Inclusion Award*, n.d., available here.

[77] Microsoft, Blog Post *Moving forward on accessibility: Announcing new structure and leads*, 2016, available here.

[78] SAP, News Article *SAP Appoints Supriya Jha Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer*, 2021, available here.

[79] Microsoft, Webpage *Inclusive Hiring at Microsoft*, n.d., available here.

[80] SAP, Webpage *Neuroinclusion at SAP*, n.d., available here.

[81] SAS, Press Release *SAS Autism Spectrum Internship Program wins NACE Diversity and Inclusion Excellence Award*, 2019, available here.

[82] Orange, *Rapport handicap, neurodiversité et accessibilité 2025*, 2025, available here.

[83] Orange, Webpage *Women in tech: building a career at Orange*, n.d., available here.

[84] Microsoft, Webpage *Inclusive Hiring at Microsoft*, n.d., available here.

[85] Microsoft, Webpage *Inside Microsoft*, n.d., available here.

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