



Policy Brief on

Boosting Digital Skills in the EU: Increasing female inclusion in the digital sector

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STUDENT FORUM MAASTRICHT

Student Forum Maastricht (SFM) is an annual student conference held at the Maastricht University Campus in Brussels. The conference is organised by students from Maastricht University in cooperation with different partner organisations. The participants are under and postgraduate students from all over Europe with diverse academic backgrounds. Based on problem statements provided by European Commission representatives, they develop policy proposals for pressing topics within the Commission. In this process the students receive input and insights from experts from NGOs, academia and the business sector relating to the topic. The 2018 edition of SFM took place from April 19th to 22nd. For more information on Student Forum Maastricht, please visit: www.student-forum.eu

Executive summary

Recent studies developed by the Commission demonstrate that bringing more women into the EU digital sector would lead to a 16 billion annual GDP boost. In addition, the European Commission has already recognized, amongst other priorities, the necessity to: 1) build a renewed image of the sector among women and society, 2) empower women in the sector, 3) increase the number of women entrepreneurs in ICTs and 4) improving working conditions of the sector.

Despite the recognition of these priorities, there is still a lack of comprehensive measures to achieve the aforementioned goals. As such, we suggest a three-fold proposal: firstly, a recommendation to increase effective communication in the sector based on already existing successful practices; secondly, a specific recommendation for the reintegration of 'women in transition' that includes a broader access and retraining of this specific vulnerable group; and thirdly, a request to increase funding for organisations that focus on the education and training of women in digital skills and foster their entrepreneurial efforts.

Problem statement

With regard to the lack of access and participation of women in the digital sector, what can be done by the European Commission in order to improve the digital skills of female population?

Specific Objectives:

- Enhance the perceived value of digital skills and the ICT sector for women
- Facilitate access for women to acquire and improve their digital skills
- Foster the employability of women in the digital sector
- Encourage female entrepreneurship in the digital sector

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Introduction

The completion of a digital single market is one of the core policies of the European Union, for which a skilled labour force is needed in order to respond to the rapidly growing ICT sector. However, as a recent Commission study on women in the digital age concludes that the number of women in the digital sector is constantly declining. This is in a strong contrast to the growing needs of the industry for a specialised workforce, which are not being met at the time being.

This mismatch is also expressed in the labour market, where by 2020, there will be 900.000 job vacancies in the ICT related sector. In order to tackle these challenges, the Commission needs to ensure that citizens have the appropriate tools to make the Digital Single Market functional.

Despite the potential of the digital sector in the economy, a persistent asymmetry in participation of women in this environment continues to grow; namely, a gender gap. To be more precise, the share of men working in the ICT sector is already 313% greater than the share of women. These alarming numbers highlight the persistent nature of the problem.

Acknowledging that the European Union should act only within the limits of the competences conferred upon it by the Member States and bearing in mind that further educational action falls under Article 6(e) TFEU, we encourage the Commission to take action in this matter within the scope of its competences. As a result, this proposal will take the form of a policy recommendation.

This proposal will contain three major recommendations, chosen based on Commission studies and declarations. Student Forum Maastricht therefore encourages the European Commission to take the following measures:

- The creation of a set of ICTs Language Fact Sheets by an expert group in the Commission in order to increase effective communication between stakeholders and to attract and appeal to the female workforce;
- A recommendation to address the specific vulnerable group of 'women in transition (aged between 25-54) in order to be reintegrated into the digital workforce.
- A request to increase funding is dedicated to provide organisations, working on introducing women in ICT, with necessary resources. Additionally, it attempts to provide funds for female ICT specialists to foster entrepreneurial innovation.

Policy Briefs

1. 'ICTs Language Fact sheets' to increase effective communication in the digital sector

Challenge

The language used by stakeholders in describing or promoting digital skills initiatives is not suitable in encouraging women to participate in the digital sector. Recent studies suggest that women do not feel comfortable and do not identify themselves with the digital sector due to a perceived social norm. This is manifested early during education, where women are not encouraged to improve their digital skills. As a result, they are less likely to involve themselves in ICT-related activities later on in their lives.

Exacerbating this problem, several studies identify that there is a lack of communication among stakeholders who strive to encourage female participation in the ICT sector. More precisely, there is a lack of coordination among these parties in terms of the language they employ to attract women to the sector. To many, it remains unknown that their usage of language in for instance job offers might have a discouraging effect. Indeed, when just specific technical requirements are listed, women do not identify themselves with the position and thus feel discouraged and unfit to access the digital sector, whereas men find this linguistic use more appealing. On the other hand, the same studies show that when the objectives and impact of the position are highlighted, women are more likely to apply for this positions. This linguistic mismatch needs to be addressed in order to avoid discouragement of female participation in the sector.

Policy Recommendation I: Creation of 'ICTs Language Fact Sheets' in order to raise awareness of the communication challenge.

In order to eliminate negatively coined terms in the ICTs environment, we propose that the Commission provides its expertise and services to raise awareness about the impact of using 'discouraging language' among the relevant stakeholders. An efficient way to address this issue within its Commission competences would be to create "ICTs Language Fact Sheets".

Such fact sheets will have a two-fold structure. Firstly, they are designed to reveal the importance of the appropriate use of language among stakeholders wishing to increase female participation in the ICT sector. Secondly, ICTs Language Fact Sheets will list and explain 'discouraging terms and wordings' and point out more positive wordings that appeal to the female community and thereby create an inclusive digital offer, levelling the playing field for all applicants.

Enhancing research in ICTs linguistics

In order to implement the aforementioned recommendation, more research in this field is required. A vast majority of research is focused on the female place in digital society, including for instance challenges to be addressed or their added value to the digital sector. Nevertheless, we observe a lack of concrete research to achieve women's inclusion in the digital society. Therefore, we call upon the Commission to encourage research regarding the impact of language to reach women's inclusion in the ICTs sector. More studies are required in order to assess the positive impact of specific terms on the motivation of women to join the sector. Findings in this research will be used to complete the ICTs Language Fact Sheets.

Advantages of the proposed recommendation

The proposed measures are suitable to address the gender inequality in the ICTs sector and foster the inclusion of women to foster an accurate representation of society as a whole. The ICTs Facts Sheet as well as the call for further research are simple means to achieve far-reaching impact on the aforementioned challenges. This proposal does not require a large spending or the creation of new infrastructures, but rather aims at using the current services the European Commission has at its own disposal. As a result, with little effort, a large difference can be made.

2. Reintegration of 'Women in Transition' in the digital workforce

Challenge

Studies show that women aged 30-44 are more likely to leave the digital sector and become inactive (Woman in Digital report, EC) resulting in a loss of 16.2 billion euro in the sector.

The age group varying from 30 to 44 is considered to be the time when women in the EU typically decide to have their first children. The European Commission reported that during this period women are likely either to 'drop out of the labour market entirely, or accept lower qualified positions'. Furthermore, a report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that women experience discrimination and disadvantage related to pregnancy and maternity leave. Overall, 77% of mothers reported a negative and discriminatory experience. More importantly, around 11% felt forced to leave their job.

In the digital sector, due to its specific nature, the absence from the working environment for a small period of time is likely to require retraining in order to understand new processes that develop extremely rapidly. As a result, it is crucial to encourage partnerships with organisations that are willing to retrain those women and reintegrate them in their previous workplace. In this regard, it is important to pool together stakeholders and create an ongoing dialogue in light of the common purpose to reintegrate women in transition.

Policy Recommendation II: Encourage partnerships with organizations that are willing to create retraining projects for women in transition.

We encourage the European Commission to work hand in hand with The Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition in order to create partnerships with organisations that create retraining projects for women in transition.

This partnership could include the creation of an annual summit, which would function as a forum with a two-fold purpose. Firstly, to exchange best practices in retraining of women in transition and secondly, to increase pledges in this area. By pooling together representatives of the most important stakeholders: including for instance women associations, heads of businesses and relevant trade unions, this framework is mutually beneficial as it enables the stakeholders to exchange best practices and thus allows a smoother reintegration of women in transition.

Furthermore, within the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition framework, in the future a european scale project especially for 'women in transition' could be started.

Advantages of the proposed recommendation

The proposed measure is suitable to address the challenge presented and builds upon the already existing framework of the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition. Thus, it merely requires to contact organisations or departments of already existing partners that deal with this issue. The potential for inclusion of participation of women in transition is very large in comparison with the small effort and finance required.

3. Increased funding to enhance female inclusion in the digital sector

Challenge

The Commission's recent study on Women in the Digital Age suggests that, despite a

growing demand for ICT specialists, the total number of women in the sector decreases. However, the same study states that if more women are to be introduced to the sector, this would increase the European annual GDP by EUR 16 billion. For this reason, introducing women to the ICT sector should become a high priority to the Commission and a matter of necessity that must be reflecting when funding is discussed and negotiated.

Funding to already-existing projects

Student Forum Maastricht encourages the Commission to support women in entering the ICT workforce via increasing funding to organisations already actively working in the field. Funding active organisations and experts is a favourable option as they operate within the already established networks. The main objective of those organisations and experts will be to provide extended education to women, in the field of ICT. Thus, making it possible for women to enter into the emerging sector.

However, such funds should be used in a variety of other ways. For example, as outlined by Commissioner Mariya Gabriel to advocate and support women entrepreneurs. Another significant argument in favour of the policy is its scalability. If small scale pilots prove to be effective in their short-term effects, they can easily be extended by increased spending and the inclusion of more organisations.

Use European Social Fund as a platform to distribute Commission Funds

The European Social Funding program is dedicated to supporting entrepreneurship and the protection of vulnerable groups. The Commission could expand and specifically target female entrepreneurship in the ICT sector via this funding programme. SMEs makeup for over 99% of the businesses in EU. The initiative to encourage the founding of SMEs and start-ups represents an important step towards increasing the number of women in ICT and therefore the output and revenue of the sector. Furthermore, the initiative should preferably be extended by increased welfare measurements to further attract entrepreneurship in the sector.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the EU is currently facing a concerning issue on the gender gap in the ICT sector, as women's participation in the digital sector is indeed significantly decreasing. This is in a strong contrast to the growing needs of the industry for a specialised workforce, which are not being met at the time being. Therefore, in order to change that alarming trend, three measures have been proposed to the European Commission.

Under the form of policy recommendations, three proposals are presented in order to target specific aims within the larger framework of increasing female participation in the digital sector.

Firstly, with the aim of increasing effective communication in the digital sector, the creation of ICTs Language Fact Sheets by an expert group in the Commission is proposed. This proposal is combined with a larger investment in research in this field to ensure the quality of the sheets.

Secondly, with the aim to target the especially vulnerable group of women in transition in the digital sector, we encourage the creation of partnerships with organisations and exchange of best practices between stakeholders that currently provide retraining to women in transition in the digital sector.

Thirdly, within the overall aim of increasing female inclusion in ICT, a proposal to increase funding is presented, via the European Social Fund but also as a larger necessity that needs to be addressed during funding negotiations in general.

While being aware that the given measures in this policy proposal are not enough to fully address the existing gender gap in the ICT sector and that long-term solutions are required. The aforementioned proposals attempt to provide short-term solutions to a pressing need in order to pave the way for a more comprehensive strategy in the near future.