



Education key to closing digital skills and gender gaps, say stakeholders



The digital skills shortage is a key reason why Europe is not at the forefront of the digital transformation, MEP Maria da Graça Carvahlo said. [Shutterstock / Alex Supertramp]

This article is part of our special report Addressing the digital gender divide.

Industry stakeholders say that a greater emphasis on digital education will be crucial to closing both the skills and gender gap in the digital sector, callir more attention to boost capacity.

The digital skills shortage is a key reason why Europe is not at the forefront of the digital transformation, MEP Maria da Graça Carvahlo said, speaking on women's participation in the digital economy hosted by EURACTIV and KDT-JU last week.

Tackling this shortage of digital skills, she said, will boost Europe's digital economy as a whole and the position of women within it, opening up further opportunities for those already in or looking to join the sector.

"We live in an increasingly digital world. We all know how digital technologies have penetrated our lives, our economy and our society", said Antoaneta Angelova-Krasteva, director for innovation, digital education and international cooperation at the Commission's education and culture department.

"Therefore, we cannot allow girls and women in the EU to miss out on the crucial 21st-century skills and on the economic opportunities they bring", she said.

As part of its Digital Decade targets, the digital transformation plan inaugurated last year, the Commission aims to empower 80% of Europe's population with essential digital skills by 2030. In addition, it hopes to work towards gender convergence when it comes to ICT specialists, the current vast majority of whom are men.

To strengthen digital education, policymakers and industry representatives at the event agreed it is necessary to agree on a comprehensive, cross-border and cross-sectoral approach. This should reconfigure STEM education on a technical level and rethink how girls and women are taught and encouraged to relate to these studies and career paths.

The way STEM and ICT are currently taught in schools and perceived more broadly poses critical barriers to girls' and women's full participation in these fields, Krasteva said. Furthermore, they have created "different expectations of what girls and boys should pursue as subjects in school and their careers."

The role of parents and teachers here is also crucial, adding that girls' capabilities when it comes to STEM subjects are often underestimated, which can negatively impact their education and interest from a young age.

She said that encouraging more equitable digital education will require a pan-European effort to share best practices and experiences between member states at both policy and school level. Essential to this will be ensuring that teachers have the skills and confidence required to administer digital education to students, she added.

MEP Carvahlo echoed this, saying that strengthening girls' ICT education from a very young age would help combat inaccurate perceptions of the field as one meant for boys, but added that investing in teaching was vital.

"Teachers here have a very important role, and it is a fact that we don't have enough trained teachers in the area of ICT to cultivate this taste for ICT at a very young age," she said. "That is something that member states need to look at, to bring this to primary schools or at a very early stage of education."

She said that there also needs to be investment from higher education institutions in reaching out to schools to publicise the available programmes and ensure that students see women represented in these areas at the university level.

“It’s very important that when they go to high schools or they invite high schools to come to see universities, they keep in mind that they need to show that science engineering, that ICT is a woman’s business, it’s not a man’s business”, she said, noting that to ensure this happens, “you need to have a critical mass of women all professors and teachers.”

In all of this, said Angelova-Krasteva, it is also essential that a multidisciplinary approach is adopted when it comes to digital education, removing traditional barriers between areas of study to connect STEM subjects with the arts, humanities and social sciences.

“This”, she said, “is a way to tackle both the crucial skills shortages, but also a way to encourage the development of transversal skills, which will drive entrepreneurship and innovation.”

“We need a holistic approach when it comes to solving the problem of the digital gender gap, and we need joined-up efforts to meaningfully tackle this issue”, she said. “Only when all sectors work together – public and private – on all levels – European, national, regional, local – can we succeed and make a difference.”

[Edited by Luca Bertuzzi/Alice Taylor]

© 1999 - 2022 | Efficacité et Transparence des Acteurs Européens. EURACTIV MEDIA NETWORK BV. | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Cookie Policy](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact us](#)