



# Disability and Gender Gaps: Addressing unequal employment of women with disabilities

European Disability Forum  
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**EDF Position paper and Recommendations on employment of women with disabilities in the European Union**

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## Introduction

### The European Disability Forum

The European Disability Forum (EDF) is an umbrella organisation of persons with disabilities that defends the interests of over 100 million persons with disabilities in the European Union. We are a unique platform that brings together representative organisations of persons with disabilities from across Europe. We are run by persons with disabilities and their families, and as such represent a strong, united voice of persons with disabilities in Europe.

EDF is committed to women's rights and gender equality. We are a member of the European Women's Lobby.

### Acknowledgements

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## Background information

While equal access to employment has improved over the years, the labour and pay gaps<sup>1</sup> remain a reality in the European Union.

Data shows that both women and persons with disabilities, analysed separately, continue to face discrimination in employment, whether it relates to access to employment or equal pay for equal work. Because of

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<sup>1</sup> The **labour gap** refers to the difference in employment between different groups of people. The **pay gap refers** to the difference in earnings between groups of people.

intersectionality discrimination, this issue affects women with disabilities disproportionately. They earn less and face worse employment rates than men (with and without disabilities) and women without disabilities.

The causes behind employment and pay gaps are multi-faceted. Lower education and training levels create a huge gap before persons with disabilities, including women, access habilitation/rehabilitation for employment. Stigma and discrimination, sectoral segregation, with higher earning sectors being disproportionately male-dominated, and work-life balance, with women spending more time conducting informal unpaid work and caretaking responsibilities, are among the many barriers faced by women with disabilities.

Both women and people with disabilities are less likely to be full-time employees. For people with disabilities, fewer employment opportunities may respect their rights and accommodate their needs. Outright discrimination in hiring and pay against women and people with disabilities is also a factor.

The EU and its Member States must comply with their obligations to ensure the right to work of women with disabilities. Under the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (CRPD), the EU and its Member States have the obligation to take measures to ensure equal access to work and employment in the open labour market to persons with disabilities, including women. In addition, all EU Member States are bound to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment under the **United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women** (CEDAW).

## The situation of women with disabilities in the European Union

Women with disabilities constitute 25.9% of the total population of women in the European Union<sup>2</sup> and 60% of the overall population of over 100 million persons with disabilities.

Despite this large population of 60 million, women and girls with disabilities continue to face multiple and intersectional discrimination in all areas of life, including socio-economic disadvantages, low rates of employment, and high rates of poverty.

On average, EU figures indicate that:

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<sup>2</sup> EU-SILC UDB release 1, 2021. Data available in European comparative data on Europe 2020 and persons with disabilities (December 2021), page 19.

- 29.5% of women with disabilities are at risk of **poverty and social exclusion** compared to 27.4% of men with disabilities – women with “severe” disabilities are even more impacted with 33.9% of them at risk of poverty and social exclusion, compared to 34.2% of men with “severe” disability.<sup>3</sup>
- About 49.0 % of women with disabilities, aged 20-64, are employed compared to 53.9 % of men with disabilities of the same age group.<sup>4</sup>
- When looking at **full-time employment**, only 20% of women with disabilities are in full-time employment, compared to 29% of men with disabilities, 48% of women without disabilities, and 64% of men without disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

The status of women and girls with disabilities is thus not only worse than that of women without disabilities, but also worse than that of their male peers. This situation is due to a combination of factors, including **stigma and discrimination, as well as unpaid work**. Women with disabilities face pay inequalities due to stereotypes and biases based on their gender and disability, and because of employment in informal or alternative structures. This is particularly the case for women with disabilities working in sheltered workshops with salaries often below the minimum wage. Women with disabilities may also face harassment, including sexual harassment in the workplace, and are less likely to report the offence due to fear of retaliation.<sup>6</sup>

Even when in employment, the financial resources of women with disabilities are lower than those of men with disabilities and women without disabilities. Data from the Gender Equality Index 2021 expressed in the purchasing power standard (PPS)<sup>7</sup> shows that the EU average mean equivalised net income<sup>8</sup> was of 16.822 PPS per year for women with disabilities compared to 17,746 PPS for men with disabilities, 20.100 PPS for women without disabilities, and 20,935 PPS for men without disabilities. **Lower financial resources and in-work poverty are thus also a reality for many women with disabilities in full or part-time employment.**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

<sup>4</sup> EU-SILC UDB 2019

<sup>5</sup> Gender Equality Index 2021

<sup>6</sup> UN Women, Sexual harassment against women with disabilities in the world of work and on campus (2020)

<sup>7</sup> The purchasing power standard is an artificial currency that accounts for differences in price levels between the Member States.

<sup>8</sup> The mean equivalised net income is an indicator of financial resources that includes pensions, investments, benefits, and other sources in addition to paid work.

## Data on full-time employment and financial resources

### Access to full-time equivalent

In terms of employment, women face more disparities than men, with both men with disabilities and women with disabilities facing more unemployment than those without disabilities.

### **Women with disabilities have less access to full-time employment compared to men with disabilities, women without disabilities, and men with disabilities.**

Greece, Bulgaria, and Italy have the lowest full-time employment rate for women with disabilities. Those with the highest employment rate for women with disabilities are Estonia, Denmark, and Latvia.

Eleven Member States have an employment rate of women with disabilities below the EU average. They are highlighted in orange in the table below.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1 – Access to full-time equivalent employment rate (in %)<sup>10</sup>**

Country	Women with disabilities	Men with disabilities	Women without disabilities	Men without disabilities
EU average	20	29	48	64
Austria	23	38	46	71
Belgium	19	27	50	63
Bulgaria	14	20	54	65
Croatia	15	21	54	66
Cyprus	22	33	58	71
Czechia	24	28	58	74
Denmark	31	37	52	61

<sup>9</sup> Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Poland, Romania, and Spain.

<sup>10</sup> This data is from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) [Gender Equality Index 2021](#). The Full-Time Equivalent Employment Rate unit is obtained by comparing each worker's average number of hours worked with the average number of hours worked by a full-time worker. The original source of EIGE's calculated data is the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) microdata 2019.

Estonia	33	42	66	77
Finland	28	30	52	60
France	25	30	49	61
Germany	23	31	48	66
Greece	9	13	40	60
Hungary	19	27	56	70
Ireland	15	23	48	64
Italy	14	28	41	62
Latvia	30	38	62	73
Lithuania	24	31	64	71
Luxembourg	27	32	50	62
Malta	16	35	49	72
Netherlands	21	32	48	66
Poland	19	26	53	70
Portugal	28	32	60	66
Romania	16	28	50	71
Slovakia	27	35	61	75
Slovenia	23	29	56	65
Spain	15	21	46	60
Sweden	25	32	50	63

## Financial resources

In terms of financial resources, women tend to earn less than men, with both men and women with disabilities facing a greater disparity than people without disabilities. **Women with disabilities have the lowest financial resources compared to men with disabilities, and women without disabilities.**

Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania have the lowest mean equivalised net income for women with disabilities. Luxembourg, Austria, and France have the highest mean equivalised net income for women with disabilities.

Fifteen Member States have a mean equivalised set income of women with disabilities below the EU average. They are highlighted in orange in the table below.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 2 – Mean equivalised net income (in PPS)<sup>12</sup>**

Country	Women with disabilities	Men with disabilities	Women without disabilities	Men without disabilities
EU average	16822	17746	20100	20935
Austria	23758	24945	27897	28994
Belgium	20417	20464	24382	26008
Bulgaria	7565	8340	11174	12054
Croatia	9579	10154	12808	12966
Cyprus	18470	19228	23005	23665
Czechia	11964	13446	15527	17083
Denmark	21134	23451	23706	24843

<sup>11</sup> Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

<sup>12</sup> This data was taken from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) [Gender Equality Index 2021](#). The mean equivalised net income is an indicator of financial resources that includes pensions, investments, benefits, and other sources in addition to paid work. The indicator is expressed in the purchasing power standard (PPS), an artificial currency that accounts for price differences between member states. The original source of EIGE's calculated data is from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC) microdata 2019.

Estonia	12398	13488	16883	17335
Finland	19112	19969	22408	23497
France	21256	21998	25025	25576
Germany	20823	21212	25092	26412
Greece	9793	10510	11641	11788
Hungary	8954	9028	10933	11407
Ireland	20507	18911	23358	24586
Italy	17875	18703	19481	20351
Latvia	9933	11228	14228	14797
Lithuania	10209	11750	15362	16038
Luxembourg	31096	33273	35291	36525
Malta	16430	17614	21409	21989
Netherlands	19946	21301	24325	25718
Poland	11827	12195	14217	14691
Portugal	12257	11981	14316	14664
Romania	7157	7647	8879	9063
Slovakia	10398	10612	11425	11836
Slovenia	14349	15424	17955	18233
Spain	16498	16601	19212	19570
Sweden	16876	17746	20100	20935



## Relevant EU initiatives

While disability and gender-based discrimination are prohibited in employment under EU law,<sup>13</sup> it is not enough to ensure equal treatment in the field of work.

To address lasting inequalities, the European Commission included measures to foster access to the labour market in its **Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030** and **Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025**. Unfortunately, women with disabilities, their challenges and perspectives are not explicitly mentioned under EU measures related to employment in the two Strategies. They are solely addressed in two measures addressed to the Member States, namely:

- “Member States can make use of the reinforced Youth Guarantee to support young persons with disabilities. Other groups requiring particular attention are women and persons with psychosocial disabilities.”
- “In parallel, Member States also develop ‘inclusive entrepreneurship’ policies targeted at under-represented groups such as women, youth and migrants, including also persons with disabilities.”

The European Commission must ensure that **all initiatives** addressing the employment of women and people with disabilities are developed and implemented in a way that does not leave women with disabilities behind. For example, the **Employment package to improve labour market outcomes of persons with disabilities** will be of great importance and so, it must include the perspective of women with disabilities.

Other initiatives that must include the gender and disability perspectives are, for example, the **Updated Skills Agenda for Europe** and the **Council recommendation on vocational education and training**.

The proposal of a **Directive of Pay Transparency** is also of key importance to reveal and reduce pay inequalities between gender, and should also benefit persons with disabilities.

Regarding the **European Semester**, relevant improvements have been developed after the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and persons with disabilities are slowly being considered when reporting on the socioeconomic context of the Member States. Nevertheless, women with disabilities are still out of the scope of the analysis. Similarly, the

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<sup>13</sup> Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation; Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast).

employment of women with disabilities is not included in the indicators of the Social Scoreboard.

## Recommendations

### Access to the labour market

To increase women's participation in the labour market and to tackle gender employment, pay and pension gaps, which contribute to poverty, EDF recommends that the European Commission:

- Ensure that women with disabilities are included in measures related to employment developed under the Disability Rights and Gender Equality Strategies, including the package to improve labour market outcomes of persons with disabilities foreseen for 2022.
- Include indicators on employment of women with disabilities in the Social Scoreboard and specific recommendations in the country reports.
- Promote a quality inclusive and non-stereotyped education system and ensure the choice of fields of studies for girls and women with disabilities, so that they can choose their work in light of their desires and talents, and not be limited by inaccessibility, bias, and stereotypes.
- Encourage Member States, through the European Semester Process, to make use of EU funding, particularly ESF+ and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to invest in targeted actions to reduce the gender and disability employment gap. This could take the form of training and outreach programs for girls and women with disabilities to build skills relevant to the current job market and for their career of choice. Investment should also be made for mentoring programs within the workplace, and guidance/support services to assist in career progression. Member States should also be encouraged to facilitate access to capital for female entrepreneurs.
- Ensure awareness of legal rights, including the rights to work and employment, with a specific focus on accessibility and reasonable accommodation in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- Better enforce EU legislation, for instance by improving access to justice and by empowering equality bodies to tackle discrimination in access to employment and support victims.

- Promote the development of awareness-raising campaigns and other measures to tackle harassment in the workplace, including sexual harassment and retaliation for speaking up, which hinders access to work and employment, job retention, and equal career paths.
- Promote actions and exchange of good practices among Member States, making sure that it is beneficial financially for women, including women with disabilities, to work (by changing rules on taxes and social protection rights, where possible and necessary, including by allowing the compatibility of disability-related social protection schemes and salaries), in particular by addressing the unequal distribution of unpaid care work and the persistent gaps in pay and pensions and ensuring that women and men become equal-earners-equal-carers throughout their lives.
- Task the EU's new High-Level Group on the future of social protection and of the welfare state to push for a coordinated approach among Member States that allows persons with disabilities, including women with disabilities, to retain disability allowance income to continue alongside.

### **Addressing the pay gap through pay transparency**

The EDF believes that transparency in pay composition will make it easier for women to identify pay discrimination. With detectable pay gaps, proof of underpayment can be used to challenge pay discrimination via the legal process.

To ensure that no woman is left behind, the EU must study the gender pay gap between women with disabilities, in comparison to men with disabilities and women without disabilities.

The [EDF recommends](#) the following:

- Pay transparency obligations must apply to all employers, regardless of the size of the organisation and the types of employment (including shelter and part-time employment).
- Legislation must introduce an intersectional approach through positive measures and non-discriminatory recruitment practices. Factors in addition to gender, such as disability, cannot justify a difference in salary for similar work, following the 2000 EU Employment Equal Treatment Directive.
- Pay for part-time work must align with full-time pay.

- Information on pay transparency must be available and accessible for all women with disabilities, using communication formats such as easy-to-read and accessible digital documents.
- Legislation must include effective and proportionate penalties for companies and compensation for victims of discrimination.
- Equality bodies must have access to pay reports and be equipped to support complaints of pay inequalities from women with disabilities.

## Additional information

- [Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025](#)
- [Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030](#)
- [European Parliament Report on 'Equal treatment in employment and occupation in light of the UNCRPD'](#)
- [European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2021 on the implementation of Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation in light of the UNCRPD \(2020/2086\(INI\)\)](#)
- [Gender Equality Index 2019 Work-life balance](#) (full report under downloads section)
- [UN Women, Sexual harassment against women with disabilities in the world of work and on campus \(2020\)](#)
- [EDF's recommendations on the Gender Equality Strategy post-2019 \(2019\)](#)
- [EDF proposals for amendments to the Pay Transparency Directive \(2021\)](#)
- [EDF's recommendations on pay transparency \(2020\)](#)
- [EDF Human Rights Report 2020: Poverty and Social Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities \(2020\)](#)
- [EDF's position paper on Ensuring adequate wages and workers' rights for persons with disabilities \(2021\)](#)
- [EDF informs Member States about employment of persons with disabilities \(2022\)](#)

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