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Women in tech: #IChooseToChallenge the status quo

By Lise Fuhr, Director General, ETNO

Today is about celebrating women in all regions of the world. The International Women's Day is a reminder that opportunity must be equally accessible to all of us, irrespective of gender. A digital and analogue society in which we are fairly represented is the first step towards inclusion. From an economic standpoint, it will also ignite growth. The topic of this year's March 8 celebrations is [#IChooseToChallenge](#), inviting women all around the world to challenge the status quo. This is why, as ETNO's Director General, I choose to challenge the lack of women in tech.

The status quo: see you in 257 years?

First, let us look at the gender gap in education and employment: things are improving. Surprised? Here comes the striking fact: at the current pace, it will take [257 years](#) to close it. Our daughters and granddaughters and their future generations will face similar challenges throughout their lives. Why do we have to wait for year 2278 to close the gender gap?

Second, I want to bring some facts from the online world. Are women treated equally in digital spaces? [Studies](#) shed light on this and the quick answer is: no. Younger European women are more likely to be harassed online: one in five women aged between 18-24 years have been subject to such harassment. Moreover, women with strong opinions and high visibility are [targeted](#) even more intensively.

This is the status quo. #IChooseToChallenge it and invite you to join me in doing so.

Women in tech and digital, beyond stereotypes

The gap starts at the very beginning of the chain: education. The percentage of women in the fields of engineering and technology is as low as [19%](#). The number is similar to the percentage of ICT specialists in the EU: only [18%](#) are women. These are the “seeds” that once planted, they have potential to evolve and climb up the professional ladder. But if we look at the top of the hierarchy, we struggle to find women who occupy executive positions. According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), only 1% of CEOs are women.

How long does it take you to name just one without Googling it? Take your time.

I will be transparent. The telecommunications sector makes no exception to the rule. At ETNO, we do our best to empower the talented women in our Team and from our member companies,. And we have plenty of powerful leaders who shape up the policy, regulatory or more technical work beyond the digital networks that keep us all connected. However, the CEO representativeness is not better than that we see in so many other sectors.

To tackle stereotypes and inspire young women to pursue digital careers, I am a proud board member of the European Cyber Security Organisation ([ECSO](#)). Through the Women4Cyber initiative, we are working on raising awareness and funds to advocate for a gender-inclusive cybersecurity community. You can find out more info or join the initiative [here](#).

Inspire to aspire: Karen, Radia, Elizabeth, Jane

We need more female digital icons. Digital gender stereotypes need to be challenged. Digital leaders must motivate more and more young women to jump on a digital career train.

As a young woman I got inspired to pursue a career in technology by other women: the work of **Karen Sparck-Jones** who pioneered computer science, now used by most search engines. **Radia Perlman** is another emblematic figure who motivated generations of women through her impressive work. Radia set-up the basic rules of Internet traffic which led to her nickname as “the mother of the Internet”. There was also **Elizabeth Feinler**, who developed the top-level domain-naming schemes of .com, .edu, .gov or .net.

Also my very first boss, Jane, who is a female lawyer and was Head of Unit in the Ministry I worked in, inspired me to pursue a leadership role. She was a role model herself, but also a very good mentor as she believed in empowering her young employees no matter gender.

We need more personal success stories. Not only for the obvious reason of feeling more included in shaping the digital world that we are all going to use tomorrow, but also for

economic reasons. The European Commission's study on [Women in the digital age](#) found that if more women were to enter the digital jobs market, it could create an annual €16 billion GDP boost for the European economy. At EU level, that represents 35 euro per capita, per year. We are simply not using the relevant resources if we are excluding women.

Women go online (and so do harassers)

For the first time, [studies](#) show that at least in the US, there are more women online than men. This is an impressive statistic so far. But coupled with the [research](#) I mentioned at the beginning of the article, it means that hundreds of millions of young women are harassed online daily.

And there is no easy way of saying it, but the consequences of online harassment are more severe than imagined. Online harm tends to affect mental health and wellbeing of individuals. On a darker reality, some experience self-harm, anxiety, and suicide. Given that more and more people are connected and women are more likely to be subject to online harassment, the consequences are very serious.

Responsibility at our fingertips

We all need to take our share of responsibility. Naturally, some actors from the digital ecosystem can do more than others, especially at improving the algorithms and policing content.

But if the status quo is to be challenged, we need all to do a part of that job. We are more powerful together both in relation to securing equality and towards those behaving inappropriately and causing harm online.

For this year's International Women's Day, #IChooseToChallenge the status quo described in this article. I am ready to make a difference - will you join me?