



Ambitions. Rights. Belonging.

Gender (in)equality of women and girls with intellectual disabilities in Europe

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Co-funded by the European Union.

The European Union bears no responsibility for the contents of the report.

Introduction

Women and girls face discrimination, and gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person because of their gender.¹ It includes sexual and physical violence as well as verbal and emotional abuse.

For women with intellectual disabilities, the risk of experiencing gender-based violence and discrimination is particularly high. In Europe, women with disabilities are 2 to 5 times more likely to experience domestic violence than women without disabilities.^{2, 3}

In fact, women with intellectual disabilities face multiple and intersectional discrimination in all areas of life.⁴

This includes:

- The right to a life free of violence
- The right to decide and vote
- The right to live independently
- Housing and support
- Education
- Employment
- Healthcare
- Representation

On top of that, women and girls with intellectual disabilities are often left out of both gender equality and disability rights work. For example, the EU's Strategy for Equality

¹ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE): What is Gender-based violence?: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/what-is-gender-based-violence?language_content_entity=en

² European Disability Forum (EDF): Women and girls with disabilities in Europe: <https://www.edf-feph.org/women-and-gender-equality/>.

³ EDF, [Women and girls with disabilities in Europe](#).

⁴ EDF, [Women and girls with disabilities in Europe](#).

between Women and Men (2010–2015) and the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality (2016–2019) did not take their specific needs into account.

Even though the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 includes some attention to the rights of women and girls with disabilities, especially when it comes to protecting them from violence, there are still not enough actions to support women and girls with intellectual disabilities in key areas like education, jobs, and access to justice. This needs to change!

The EU’s new Gender Equality Strategy (2026-2030) must include the needs and voices of women and girls with intellectual disabilities. Only then will practical, targeted actions be directed at them, and only then can a ‘Union of Equality’ be achieved.

Violence against women

Women with intellectual disabilities are at high risk of physical, sexual, and emotional violence. This risk increases even more when they live in institutions, where they are often isolated from society and dependent on staff. Inclusion Europe’s *Life after Violence* report shows that living in institutions makes these women more vulnerable to abuse and highlights the urgent need to close these institutions and support community living.⁵

Around the world, women with disabilities are twice as likely to face domestic violence as women without disabilities.⁶ This violence can take specific forms linked to their disabilities—such as being neglected, forced into isolation, abused in institutions, or denied necessary medical care and accessibility support.

⁵ Inclusion Europe: Life after violence, 2018: https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/LAV-Publication_web.pdf.

⁶ Inclusion Europe: Violence against women: <https://www.inclusion.eu/violence-against-women>.

Surveys show that women with intellectual disabilities often experience serious forms of sexual violence:

- 61% have been sexually harassed since the age of 15,
- 26% have been stalked,
- 46% experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence before the age of 15.⁷

Inclusion Europe identifies three main types of violence affecting these women:

- Direct violence: includes physical, sexual, psychological, or financial abuse, as well as neglect,
- Careless attitude: harm caused by caregivers who ignore or neglect their needs,
- Structural violence: harm caused by unfair systems, rules, and power imbalances in society.⁸

Women with intellectual disabilities also face major barriers in getting help or justice after experiencing violence. Many cannot access support services or legal systems that could help them heal or hold abusers accountable. As a result, they are often victimised twice—first by the violence, and then by the lack of support or justice.

Right to decide and right to vote

In Europe many people with intellectual disabilities are placed under legal guardianship. Often, this means that their right to decide and their right to vote is taken away, as supported decision-making mechanisms are rarely available or accessible.

⁷ Inclusion Europe: [Violence against women](#).

⁸ Inclusion Europe: [Violence against women](#).

Currently:

- Only **4 EU countries** fully respect the right to legal capacity and provide proper decision-making support.
- In **11 countries**, legal capacity can be fully removed.
- In **16 countries**, it can be partially removed.⁹

For women with intellectual disabilities, one of the most harmful impacts of losing legal capacity is the denial of bodily autonomy – the right to make decisions about one’s own body. This includes sexual and reproductive choices. Across Europe, many women with intellectual disabilities—especially those under guardianship—are subjected to forced contraception, sterilisation, and – in case of pregnancy – abortion. Such procedures are often carried out without their full, free, and informed consent, and can cause long-term emotional and psychological harm.¹⁰ They also go against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Istanbul Convention, both ratified by the EU, which state that people with disabilities should have the same sexual rights and be able to keep their fertility on an equal basis with others.¹¹

When women with intellectual disabilities are placed under legal guardianship, their right to vote often gets removed too. By excluding women from voting and preventing them from participating in the democratic process their experiences are ignored, and their voices are silenced. As a result, important issues—like intersectional and gender-based violence, accessible healthcare, and inclusive education—are often shaped by people who do not understand or consider their needs.

⁹ Inclusion Indicators 2024, Key findings: <https://www.inclusion.eu/inclusion-indicators-2024-key-findings>.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch: Sterilization of women and girls with disabilities: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/10/sterilization-women-and-girls-disabilities>.

¹¹ In cases where forced sterilization is performed on girls it also goes against the Convention on the rights of the child.

Women with intellectual disabilities must be allowed maintain legal capacity and must be allowed to vote! Only then will their voices be heard. And only then will policy and decisionmakers reflect on their situations and consider their needs, so that laws, services, and systems improve in a way that matters to them.

Legal capacity is not just about having rights on paper—it's about ensuring people have the support they need to understand, communicate, and act on their decisions. It's about respecting human rights and treating women with intellectual disabilities as full citizens.

Right to live independently and to be included in the community

Over 800,000 people with intellectual disabilities live in segregated institutions across Europe. These institutions often group many people together, separating them from their families and communities. In Europe:

- More than 800,000 people with intellectual disabilities live in large care institutions.
- Over 100,000 live in smaller care homes.
- More than 32,000 are placed in psychiatric hospitals.
- 12 European countries still have no plans to close these institutions.¹²

Women with intellectual disabilities living in these institutions face a much higher risk of violence, including sexual abuse. Being isolated and dependent on caregivers makes them very vulnerable. Because they live away from the community, their freedom is limited, and they often have little control over their daily lives.

Self-advocate Elisabeta Moldovan spoke about her experience living in an institution in Romania: “Sexual violence took place frequently. There were staff members: guards,

¹² Inclusion Indicators 2024, [Key findings](#).

teachers, doctors who sexually abused residents. But it also happened between residents. When a woman got pregnant, and delivered a baby, the baby was taken away from the mother and brought to an orphanage.”¹³

Mirjam Braspenning, a woman with an intellectual disability talked to Inclusion Europe about the lasting negative effect of being institutionalised: “My biggest fear is that I will be put back into an institution. If I feel good about something I also fear that this good feeling will be taken away from me.”¹⁴

Women who have experienced institutionalisation and violence urgently need strong support systems to help them reintegrate into society. They require resources that allow them to live independently, safely, and with dignity.¹⁵

Forcing women with intellectual disabilities to live in institutions is a form of segregation and a violation of their basic human rights. Closing institutions and promoting community living reduces the risk of violence and respects the rights of women with intellectual disabilities.

¹³ Inclusion Europe: Elisabeta Moldovan: “There were staff members that sexually abused residents”, <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/there-were-staff-members-who-sexually-abused-residents/>.

¹⁴ Inclusion Europe, Mirjam Braspenning: “My biggest fear is that I will be put back into an institution”, <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/my-biggest-fear-is-that-i-will-be-put-back-into-an-institution/>.

¹⁵ Self-advocate Senada Halilčević talked with Inclusion Europe about what that means to her. Inclusion Europe, Senada Halilčević: “I am no longer invisible, for the first time people notice me in society”, <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/ending-segregation-senada-halilcevic-story/>.

Housing and support

Women with intellectual disabilities in Europe face many challenges when it comes to housing and support. Most still rely heavily on their families because there are very few options for independent living:

- In 19 countries, most adults with intellectual disabilities live with their parents.
- In 27 countries, few or no adults with intellectual disabilities live in their own home.
- In 27 countries, people with intellectual disabilities are likely to move into institutions when their parents can no longer care for them.¹⁶

For women with intellectual disabilities, this means a lack of safe, independent places to live where they can make their own choices. Instead, many end up in group homes or institutions, which can limit their freedom and privacy. This puts them at higher risk of abuse, neglect, and isolation.

Because of discrimination and a lack of tailored support, women with intellectual disabilities face extra difficulties. Without enough community-based housing and strong support services, many lose the chance to live independently and safely.

The EU must do more to create accessible, inclusive housing options and provide personalised support that meets the needs of women with intellectual disabilities. This would help them to be part of their communities, not segregated in institutions or left to live with their family. Supporting women to live independently is essential to respecting their rights and improving their quality of life.

¹⁶ Inclusion Indicators 2024, [Key findings](#).

Education

Many girls with intellectual disabilities attend ‘special education’ schools, where they are separated from other children. In many European Union (EU) member states, such as Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, Greece, United Kingdom, Lithuania, and Romania, the majority of students with intellectual disabilities and complex needs are referred to segregated schools.¹⁷

Accross Europe:

- At least 500,000 children with intellectual disabilities are in special schools,
- Over 18,000 children with intellectual disabilities are not in education at all.¹⁸

Some girls with intellectual disabilities never get any education. This leaves them with very few chances to find a job or live independently as adults. When girls with intellectual disabilities are kept apart, they miss out on opportunities to make friends, learn important skills, and on experiences that help prepare them for adulthood and future employment.

Thousands of girls with intellectual disabilities still have no access to school.¹⁹ Their families are often left alone without support, and those with complex support needs are the most excluded.²⁰ Segregated schooling hinders natural relationships between girls with intellectual disabilities and other children, limits opportunities later in life, and places extra burdens on parents and society.

¹⁷ Inclusion Europe: Inclusive education benefits all students, with or without disabilities, <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/inclusive-education-benefits-all-students-with-or-without-disabilities-2/>.

¹⁸ Inclusion Indicators 2024, [Key findings](#).

¹⁹ Inclusion Europe: Let’s make the next step, and leave segregated schooling to history, <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/lets-make-the-next-step-and-leave-segregated-education-to-history/>.

²⁰ Inclusion Europe: [Let’s make the next step, and leave segregated schooling to history](#).

There are inclusive schools that already show what is possible – but too often they are treated as small “good practice” projects rather than as the norm.²¹ The know-how from these schools is not spread widely enough across mainstream education. As a result, girls with intellectual disabilities continue to be denied equal opportunities.

Inclusive education means that all children, with and without disabilities, learn together in the same classrooms. Schools must change to meet the needs of every student by giving the right support and using teaching methods that work for all. Too often inclusive education policies are not taken seriously enough to be fully implemented.

Being excluded from mainstream schools also means girls miss out on sexual education. Some people wrongly believe that women and girls with intellectual disabilities do not need this, which puts them at risk for sexual and psychological assault.

The EU must ensure that every school becomes inclusive for girls with intellectual disabilities. They must receive the support they need to succeed, learn side by side with their peers, and gain the education that is essential for independence, employment, and dignity in the future.

Employment

Having a job is about more than earning money. Work helps people feel included, use their skills, meet others, and be part of society. But for women with intellectual disabilities in Europe, getting a job is much harder.

²¹ Inclusion Europe: [Let's make the next step, and leave segregated schooling to history.](#)

Women with intellectual disabilities face more barriers to work than both men with disabilities and women without disabilities.^{22 23} They are more likely to be unemployed, earn less when they do work, and often don't get the support they need to find or keep a job.

Because of this, women with intellectual disabilities are at a higher risk of poverty²⁴. Many also have extra disability-related costs—like support services or accessible transport—that are not fully covered by benefits. Without enough income, these women struggle to meet their basic needs and live independently.

In the EU only 48.1% of women with disabilities aged 20–64 are employed. This is lower than 53.7% of men with disabilities in the same age group.²⁵

Looking at the broader population, only 61.6% of persons with disabilities are in the labour market (working or looking for work), compared to 82.2% of persons without disabilities.²⁶

This means that many women with intellectual disabilities are left out of the workforce and the opportunities that come with it. They are forced to depend on family, institutions, or limited social benefits, which makes it harder to live freely and independently.

²² EDF: Disability and gender gaps: Addressing unequal employment of women with disabilities, <https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2022/09/EDF-recommendations-on-employment-of-women-with-disabilities-September-2022-final.pdf>.

²³ International Labour Organisation (ILO) / Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Labour market inclusion of people with disabilities, 2018, page 3.

²⁴ Inclusion Europe: Poverty of people with intellectual disabilities and their families, Policy briefing, Page 7, [Briefing-Poverty-of-persons-with-intellectual-disabilities-and-their-families-2020.pdf](#).

²⁵ European Comparative data on persons with disabilities. S. Grammenos, 2020. European Commission: [EDE2022-Statistics Comparative analysis - Summary Report_FINAL.pdf](#)

²⁶ European Comparative data on persons with disabilities. S. Grammenos, 2020. European Commission. Page 9, [EDE2022-Statistics Comparative analysis - Summary Report_FINAL.pdf](#)

Healthcare

Women with intellectual disabilities have the same right to good healthcare as everyone else. But in reality, they face many barriers that stop them from getting the care they need. Across the European Union, women with intellectual disabilities are often excluded from health services, especially when it comes to sexual, reproductive, and mental health.

Women with intellectual disabilities have a life expectancy that is up to 18 years lower than other women.²⁷ They also face 2.5 times more unmet medical needs.²⁸

These numbers show that the healthcare system is failing them. Health services are not accessible. Information is too complicated. Doctors and nurses are often not trained to explain medical procedures in a way that women with intellectual disabilities can understand. This makes them dependent on others to understand their own bodies and health, taking away their privacy and freedom of choice.

Sexual and reproductive health is especially neglected. Women with intellectual disabilities are often stigmatized and seen as asexual or unfit to become parents. Because of this, they do not get proper education about their rights, relationships, or how to protect themselves from pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. In many cases, they are pressured or forced to take contraception, have abortions, or undergo sterilisation—without their consent.²⁹ In 2024, only 9 countries criminalised forced sterilisation as a

²⁷ Inclusion Europe: Healthcare: <https://www.inclusion.eu/healthcare>.

²⁸ Inclusion Europe: [Healthcare](#).

²⁹ The New York Times: Despite bans, disabled women are still being sterilized in Europe, by Sarah Hurtes, November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/25/world/europe/europe-disabled-women-sterilization.html>.

distinct offense, 13 countries still allowed it to be performed on women with disabilities, and in 3 of them also on minors.^{30 31} This is a serious violation of their human rights.

Mental health is another area where support is lacking. Women with intellectual disabilities often have their mental health needs ignored or misdiagnosed.³² Instead of receiving proper care, they may be placed in psychiatric institutions, which adds to their trauma and isolation. Families who support them also lack mental health services.

Healthcare systems must become inclusive to be good. This means using easy-to-read information, training medical staff, and making services affordable. Most importantly, women with intellectual disabilities must be seen as full and equal citizens, able to make their own choices about their health, their bodies, and their lives.

Representation

Women with intellectual disabilities are still largely missing from politics, media, and leadership roles in Europe. Their voices are not heard enough in decisions that affect their lives, including in disability organisations.

In many countries, women with intellectual disabilities face barriers to voting or running for office, especially if their legal capacity is restricted. Even where rights have been restored—such as in Spain, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Slovenia—practical challenges remain.³³ Elections are often not accessible, and support to understand

³⁰ EDF: Why is forced sterilization still legal in the EU? <https://www.edf-feph.org/why-is-forced-sterilisation-still-legal-in-the-eu/>.

³¹ European Economic and Social Committee: Sexual and reproductive health rights of women with disabilities: Discrimination running high, July 2024, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/sexual-and-reproductive-health-rights-women-disabilities-discrimination-running-high>.

³² Inclusion Europe: [Healthcare](#).

³³ Inclusion Europe, Europe for us: Representation matters, <https://str.inclusion.eu/198cc175df5eb2e86ce7ab90e.pdf>.

information or to take part is missing. As a result, very few women with intellectual disabilities are able to participate fully in political life.

But, there also are recent examples of positive change. In 2024, Mar Galcerán became Spain's first parliamentarian with Down syndrome. Her election shows that women with intellectual disabilities can and do succeed in politics when they are given equal opportunities. In France, Eléonore Laloux has been serving as a municipal councillor in the city of Arras since 2020. She works on issues of accessibility, inclusion, and city life, and is recognised as a strong advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. These stories show what is possible when barriers are removed and women with intellectual disabilities are supported to lead.³⁴

Yet such examples are still rare. Without visible role models, many women and girls with intellectual disabilities are left without the chance to imagine themselves in leadership positions.

In disability organisations, leadership roles are often held by men or people without intellectual disabilities. This limits representation and means that the specific needs of women with intellectual disabilities are not always included in advocacy or policy work.

In the media, their stories are rarely told, and when they are, they are often reduced to stereotypes or “inspirational” portrayals. Media should show women with intellectual disabilities as full citizens with diverse interests, ideas, and opinions.

To create change, women with intellectual disabilities must be supported to speak for themselves and lead. Self-advocacy, inclusive policies, and more accessible platforms are key to making sure their voices are heard.

³⁴ Inclusion Europe, [Europe for us: Representation matters](#).