Digital Skills & Jobs Platform

Are we blaming girls for not fixing the digital divide(s)? The case for feminist digital youth work

The Digital Brief series dive deep into the latest trends and topics in the area of digital skills and jobs and are produced in collaboration with proven experts in the field.

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Introduction: can digital youth work fix the future?

As Europe advances its vision of a "digital decade"—full of talk about AI innovation, green tech, and digital transformation—there is growing evidence that non-formal education settings are relentlessly stepping in to fill critical gaps, particularly through the expanding field of digital youth work.

Digital youth work has been on the European agenda since the mid-2010s and received official recognition in 2017, when the EU Experts Group laid the foundations for its definition (Pawluczuk and Șerban, 2022). Digital youth work was originally defined as the purposeful use of digital media and technologies in youth work practice, grounded in values of participation, inclusion, and empowerment. As digital youth work initiatives such as coding clubs, robotics workshops, and media labs have spread across European countries, there's been a practical need to support youth workers in delivering this work—hence the development of toolkits, courses, and guidance (for example SALTO's resources on Inclusion & Diversity in Digital Youth Work; SKILLS IT's Competence Framework for Digital Youth Work Practice).

Parallel to the practical explorations of the practice, digital youth work has also become a growing area of research. Critical insights into digital youth work inequalities, its democratic and political potential, and the core purpose and limitations of digital youth work have been examined (for example, Fernández-de-Castro et al, 2021; Pawluczuk and Șerban, 2022, Vermeire and Van den Broeck, 2024). I currently lead the work of the Digital Youth Work Research Hub at the University of Leeds, and alongside colleagues such as **Lotte Vermeire** and **Cristina Bacalso** we try to approach digital youth work as an emerging area of research requires more visibility, funding, and policy recognition. Digital youth work analysis can offer important insights into how both formal and non-formal education respond to the demands of digital transformation—not just in terms of employment, but in relation to young people's needs for critical digital literacy and democratic digital citizenship.

Put simply: the role of youth work should not only about getting young people "future-proof" for digital jobs but about ensuring they can understand and participate in digital transformation in a meaningful and informed way.

Mapping Inequalities in Digital Youth Work

Digital youth work does not mean the same thing across from one EU Member State to the next. National implementation of the Bonn Process— a Europe-wide effort to strengthen and develop youth work—varies widely, with some countries having well-established ecosystems while others are only beginning to build them (Atanasov and Hofmann-van de Poll, 2025). The same goes for digital youth work which heavily relies on a country's youth work infrastructure, funding availability, digital policy landscape, and access to training and tools. As reported by Herranz and Schwenzer (2024) in their review of successful approaches to digital youth work, countries with strong youth work traditions and investment (like Finland, Estonia, or Germany) seem to be more advanced in integrating digital technologies meaningfully into practice.

Digital inequalities in European youth work have persisted for years, with access to digital youth work frequently influenced by intersecting factors such as geography, socio-economic background, migration status, disability, and gender. In 2022, while working at the United Nations University, I carried out a study exploring digital inequalities in youth work across Europe. Although small in its scope, the study revealed a clear gap between those who feel digital engaged and informed, and those who struggle to keep up with the demands of digital transformation (e.g., digital skills training for youth workers, access to affordable technologies and reliable internet, digitalisation of social and youth work services, AI's role in education); and therefore, also young people's digital needs (e.g., mental health, surveillance, data and AI literacy, self-development) (Pawluczuk, 2022c).

Although digital youth work gained significant recognition during the Covid-19 pandemic, the messy, underfunded reality of delivering projects on the ground gets little—if any—attention in the EU's Digital Decade vision for 2030. The current labour-oriented digital skills agenda is undeniably important, but it tends to frame skills training mainly as a way to close the digital labour gap, boost productivity, and drive innovation in EU industry and tech sectors. But what if, in the rush to make Europe a global leader in technology and innovation, the youth digital upskilling agenda focuses too heavily on employability and market-ready skills—at the expense of critical digital literacy and democratic digital participation? This emphasis risks reducing digital youth work to a narrow set of functional competencies, sidelining the need for digital citizenship, creativity, and critical engagement with technology.

Pushing young people into digital skills training solely for labour market purposes can end up reproducing the very inequalities it claims to address. Those already excluded—racialised young people, disabled youth, migrants, those without stable access to education or infrastructure—risk being further marginalised by systems that treat digital inclusion as a one-size-fits-all path to employment.

This form of marginalisation is especially important to name during the European Year of Youth Digital Citizenship, which emphasises young people's rights to participate in digital society—not just as workers, but as citizens, creators, and change-makers.

Where Are the Girls? A Gendered Lens on Digital Exclusion

The marginalising side effect of digital upskilling efforts is particularly important when it comes to gender[1]. Data shows that girls often feel excluded from mainstream activities like gaming, coding, or other technology-focused spaces, reinforcing the idea that these domains are not "for them." Such exclusions are not just social—they are structural, and they carry long-term consequences for girls' sense of belonging in digital transformation.

In this article, I reflect on how narratives around girls' inclusion in digital spaces too often fall into a neoliberal trap—focused on "fixing" girls, boosting their confidence, and producing more inspirational role models. My worry (grounded in research by scholars such as) is that – if not unpacked critically - these narratives overshadow the need for critical curiosity and political awareness of digital transformation and the different/unequal ways it might affect people of all gender and from different socio-economic backgrounds.

I would like for us to consider digital youth work as a socio-political practice—not just a set of tools or a method for teaching tech. To this end, in the later parts of this article, I briefly introduce *Feminist Digital Youth Work*, I'll argue for the importance of recognising digital youth work as a form of democratic education: one that not only supports young people to engage with digital technologies, but also empowers them to question how those technologies are shaped by, and reinforce, broader structures of exclusion and control.

And yes—I am painfully aware that frameworks and toolkits often end up living in their own abstract "framework and toolkit land." But my intention here is to ground the principles of feminist digital youth work in something tangible and practical, but most importantly highlight the importance of critical and holistic approaches to the ways we approach gender digital inclusion. If anything, I hope that this article sparks ideas and conversations about our own internalised beliefs and assumptions about the right way to get to the digital decade.

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[1] In this article, I use the term "gender" to refer primarily to girls and young women, in line with the framing of most gender digital inclusion initiatives I have encountered. However, I acknowledge that this definition is limited and that gender-diverse and non-binary young people often face even greater exclusion from digital inclusion efforts. While the focus here is on girls, this is not to overlook the urgent need for more inclusive research and practice that recognises and addresses the specific digital marginalisation of gender-diverse communities.

The Trap of Role Models and Confidence Culture

Girls are often misunderstood, under/misrepresented or even entirely overlooked in the digital transformation—right from the earliest stages of technology design and coding to the way digital technologies are being used on and for girls (Ceia, Nothwehr and Wagner, 2021). This exclusion shows in how algorithms make decisions—what is recommended, what is flagged as harmful, and whose content is seen. As a result, girls are rendered invisible in some spaces while being hyper-visible and exposed in others. For example, algorithms on platforms like TikTok often deprioritise or suppress content by Black girls or girls wearing religious dress, rendering them invisible in trending spaces. As Ceia et al., (2021) put it, "*bias is not a bug—it's embedded into digital systems from the outset,*" shaped by who codes, what data is used, and whose lives are imagined as the "default" user.

At the same time, girls—especially racialised, queer, or disabled girls—can become hyper-visible targets of harassment when their content is amplified without adequate protection. Meanwhile, content related to girls' rights, such as sexual health or gender-based violence, is frequently flagged or removed as *"inappropriate"*, while misogynistic or violent content remains widely visible. Girls are more likely to experience online harassment, gender-based hate speech, and targeted abuse, including deepfake pornography and other forms of non-consensual image manipulation. This is also partially why many choose to self-censorship as a form of protection/survival.

Despite these harms, digital safety tools and platform policies often fail to take the specific risks faced by girls seriously – and often impose a blanket approach on female body related content as overly sexualised (Gerrard & Thornham, 2020). Studies have shown that automated moderation systems disproportionately censor women's health content—ranging from menstruation education to abortion access—under vague or inconsistent platform guidelines (CensHERship, 2024). In addition, while most online safety guidance have girls well-being at their core, some seem to be placing the responsibility on girls to do to the right thing by choosing to digital exclude themselves – and not participating in online discussion, sharing photos and so on.

Girls and women's lack of digital participation is discussed in sensationalist terms. Titles such as "Europe's Digital Decade target at stake! Urgent Call to Address Gaps in Skills and Infrastructure", "The Gender Factor: More Women in ICT will Enable the EU to Reach the 2030 Digital Decade Targets"; "Confidence Crisis Hampers Girls Pursuing STEM"; "Why don't European girls like science or technology?" (2017); Why don't women use artificial intelligence? (2024), further reaffirm the narrative that girls and women as passive subjects of digital transformation. It feels

that the system has a problem with gender digital divide, **but more often it feels like it has a problem with girls and women for not trying enough.**

From digital excluded at risk girl to the shinning role model: the neoliberal model of getting girls to break into tech

Despite years of investment and political attention, the gender digital divide remains one of the most persistent and complex challenges in Europe's digital transformation. According to the 2025 *Digital Decade Progress Report*, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in STEM and ICT, making up only 19.5% of ICT specialists across the EU. The European Commission's *Digital Education Action Plan* also highlights the underrepresentation of women in digital studies and careers, reflecting broader disparities across science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. In 2023, an international study based on data from 35 countries revealed girls tend to outperform boys in computer and information literacy at younger ages (Fraillon, 2023). However, as they progress through education, they are increasingly less likely to choose ICT or STEM subjects—revealing a worrying trend of attrition rather than lack of ability or interest.

These figures have remained largely unchanged since 2015, despite numerous digital skills initiatives, targeted campaigns, and innovation-focused funding streams. The assumption often underpinning these efforts is that if we can just get more girls into coding camps, or boost women's confidence in tech spaces, the gap will close. But as decades of global evidence show, this isn't simply a pipeline problem—it is a systemic one (Singh et al., 2025).

The idea that girls should fit into a linear story from a digitally marginalised (e.g., not confident enough, disinterested in tech) to digitally empowered role models (e.g., breaking into tech, breaking the glass ceiling) is something that I've observed in my own practice and research on gender digital inclusion. These stories often focus on *"empowerment"* through tech—encouraging girls to become more confident, more entrepreneurial, and more visible in male-dominated fields. While well-meaning, these narratives individualise responsibility and obscure the structural inequalities that determine who feels safe, seen, and supported in digital life. As Mauk et al. (2020) argue, focusing on girls' confidence or 'can-do' attitudes often aligns with capitalist, binary framings of success that do little to address misogyny, racism, or ableism embedded in digital systems.

Becoming something of a canon in mainstream culture, the *"girls breaking into tech"* narrative has become a universal justification for project funding in non-formal education programmes focused on girls' digital inclusion. During my time at the United Nations University in Macau (2020–2022),

I led a research project examining how girls' digital inclusion is evaluated and how this, in turn, influences what is seen as a *"successful"* project — and therefore deemed worthy of continued support. Based on interviews with gender digital inclusion experts — many of whom led or participated in international non-formal education programmes for girls — I learned that the emphasis on stories of digital empowerment tends to place unrealistic pressure on educators to produce a polished prototype of a digitally literate, confident girl. This focus often overlooks the systemic and structural inequalities embedded in most digital transformation processes (Pawluczuk et al., 2021).

The persistent focus on fixing a perceived *"confidence"* or *"interest"* gap, and on producing tech role models, can lead to cultures of toxic positivity. In these spaces, success stories are amplified while the complex, messy, and uncertain realities of girls' digital lives are silenced. The study highlights that the role model is not inherently transformative — it does not, by itself, spark institutional change.

So, how could feminist digital youth work about the gendered nature of digital transformation?

If digital youth work is to live up to its democratic potential, we might consider move beyond frameworks that position inclusion as a numbers game or the questionable evidence behind the 'girls confidence problem in STEM' (Phipps, 2007). Going forward, we might want to consider exploring feminist digital youth work principles—ones that understand technology as socially constructed, structurally uneven, and intimately tied to systems of power. Feminist in this case means intersectional and critical – therefore at its core, its meant to help all young people.

Feminist digital youth work (Pawluczuk, 2025) does not aim to dismiss efforts focusing on getting more girls into coding or encouraging confidence. Instead, it aims to build on the existing work by offering a gentle reminder and a prompt to consider the intersectional, ideological, and political nature of gender digital inequalities. Feminist digital youth work is a critical, political, and relational practice that redefines what it means to be included in digital life. It acknowledges that access alone is not enough. For young people—especially girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals—digital inclusion must mean safety, agency, representation, and justice. Drawing on the insights of data feminism (D'Ignazio & Klein) and F. Henwood's feminist critique of technology (2000), this framework centres critical pedagogy, intersectionality, care, and participatory practice. Most importantly, feminist digital youth work also aligns with the democratic values at the heart of non-formal education in Europe: equity, inclusion, human rights, and active citizenship. It strengthens the democratic function of youth work by teaching young people not just how to use technology—but how to question, co-create, and challenge it.

Below I propose a set of questions as somewhat conclusion to this article. These questions are shared as some very early proposals to open the conversation and prompt reflection. I am aware

that the realities of delivering digital inclusion work—especially in underfunded or overburdened contexts—are often complex, messy, and shaped by structural constraints. This isn't a checklist or fixed framework, but a small attempt to support deeper thinking about what feminist digital youth work might look like in practice. I hope these prompts can help us notice things we might otherwise overlook, and perhaps tap into insights about how (or if) things could be done differently. This list is by no means exhaustive, and it carries its own limitations—but maybe it can be a starting point for collective questioning, unlearning, and reimagining.

1. How can we make time to explore not just *what* we do in digital youth work—but *why* we do it, and whose needs it really serves?
2. What assumptions might we be making about what digital inclusion *should* look like—and who is considered "included"?
3. Are we unintentionally placing pressure on young people (especially girls or marginalised youth) to "perform" confidence, empowerment, or tech interest in ways that feel limiting or unrealistic?
4. Who gets to be seen as a "role model" in our work—and do these role models reflect the complexity, messiness, and diversity of young people's digital lives?
5. How can we move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to inclusion and instead create space for different digital rhythms, boundaries, and expressions—including opting out?
6. What steps are we taking to ensure our digital activities feel safe, welcoming, and affirming for gender-diverse, disabled, racialised, and migrant young people?
7. What would it look like to talk about digital power, surveillance, or bias in our sessions—without placing the burden of awareness or resilience on young people themselves?
8. In what ways might our project (or funders) be prioritising visible success stories over quieter, slower, or more collective forms of growth and learning?
9. How do we make room for young people to challenge, critique, or reshape digital tools and narratives—not just learn to use them?
10. What would a feminist, intersectional approach to digital inclusion look like here—and how can we practice that not just in theory, but in our everyday decisions, language, and relationships?

10 prompts to think about

FEMINIST DIGITAL YOUTH

1. How can we make time to explore not just what we do in digital youth work—but why we do it, and whose needs it really serves?
2. What assumptions can we make about what digital inclusion should look like—and who is considered "included"?
3. Are we unintentionally placing pressure on young people (& girls especially) to "exhibit" confidence, empowerment, or tech interest in ways that feel limiting or unrealistic?
4. Who gets to be seen as a "role model" , and do these role models reflect the complexity, messiness, and diversity of young people's digital lives?
5. How can we move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to inclusion and instead create space for different digital rhythms, boundaries, and expressions—including opting out?
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