Raise Women's Awareness Network (RWAN)

Women in ICT
2021

Contents

Introduction

1.1 Disclaimer & confidentiality note

*This professional report has been produced by RWAN's volunteer team of researchers to share its vision, goals, activities, and achievements with the public interested in supporting **the integration of women**, and it shall not be used, disseminated, copied, or reproduced for any other purpose.*

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About Raise Women's Awareness Network (RWAN)

THE RWAN INITIATIVE STARTED IN 2018 UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR VIEWERS INTERESTS (EAVI) WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE EUROPEAN STUDENT UNION (ESU) BY THE TOGETHER, MOVING FORWARD (TMF) PROGRAMME.

RWAN WAS OFFICIALLY REGISTERED AS A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION IN BELGIUM IN APRIL 2021.

RWAN Mission, Vision, Values

RWAN's mission is to **empower women** by enhancing their awareness of their rights and of the resources available to them through education, ICT training and access to the labour market.
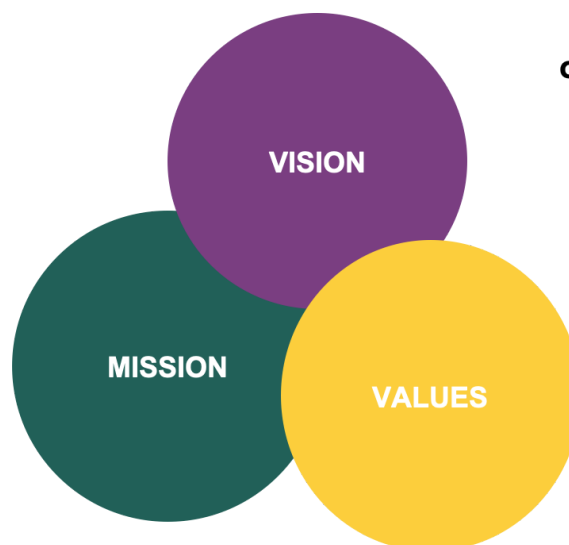
We envision a world where women can access **equal opportunities** in education, work, culture, and art.

The values that inspire our work are **Integrity, Trust, Transparency, Collaboration, Passion** in Our Purpose, **Social Responsibility,** and **Courage.**

RWAN's Activities

Access to education workshops

RWAN worked with different representatives from several universities who joined us at our many workshops to empower women in Belgium and encourage them to continue their studies. The representatives shared helpful information regarding how to apply for scholarships, aids and benefits necessary to address the challenges women may face in obtaining educational opportunities at university.

All universities provided full support to attendees as they presented a special program to facilitate their entry into the university and the continuation of their studies. Further, the university representatives explained how women with access to social security benefits can apply for reduced tuition fees for most Master's programmes.

In addition, Actiris and VDAB offered several vocational education programs to women as education is not only limited to universities: there are many educational courses available and provided by the state.

We also collaborated with KIRON, an e-learning platform that enables access to higher education and successful learning for refugees through digital solutions.

The participation of this organization was an amazing solution for those women who have been unable to access universities. Only two of the women had experience studying online through the COURSERA platform, so it was very useful for KIRON to share their project during our workshops.

In the last decade, e-learning has gained pivotal importance, especially after the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is fundamental for these women to have access to online learning opportunities as well as acquire enough skills to benefit from these opportunities.

List of educational institutions that participated:

· Université libre de Bruxelles
· Antwerp University - Linguapolis
· Vrije Universiteit Brussel VUB
· Hasselt University
· Antwerp University - Study options and the THEA project - International Students Office.
· Gent University
· Kiron Open Higher Education for Refugees

RWAN's Activities

Access to labor market workshops

On the work front, many representatives of organizations that specialize in facilitating the entry of women into the labor market participated in our workshops. They provided valuable information and tools and exchanged contacts with the women, allowing them to ask follow-up questions after the workshops.

List of educational and professional institutions that participated:

- · Microstart
- · Welcome Home International
- · DUO FOR JOB organization
- · Young Migrants Capacity Building (YMCB) Project
- · VDAB
- · Actiris
- · Bruxelles Formation

A photo from one of our organization's workshops

RWAN's Activities

Know Your Rights workshops

Our advocacy workshops are designed to empower women by educating them about their rights and how to access different resources. RWAN cooperated with 'EAVI' and 'DLA Piper Brussels' to provide specialized content. The educators shared important information emphasizing how women can better protect themselves if they have full knowledge of their rights. The content of the workshops focused on the following topics:

- Working rights
    - legal empowerment
    - contract expectations
    - sick leave
    - maternity leave
- Right to privacy and media literacy
    - mis/disinformation
    - fake news
    - combating stereotypes

RWAN sent the presentations provided to the women during the learning sessions and supported them in the process of contacting these universities/organizations afterward to request an appointment or ask questions.

Digital Literacy workshops

This report provides a summary of RWAN's initiative to provide rapid support, enabling women to gain basic but fundamental computer skills during the COVID-19 pandemic.


A photo from one of RWAN's workshops

Communication with the women's community

The cultural diversity of RWAN's team members and their ability to speak several languages enable effective communication with women of many nationalities through our Facebook group and other social media channels.

Notably, many women reported they were more apt to join this initiative when they were informed that RWAN's initiatives involve only women.
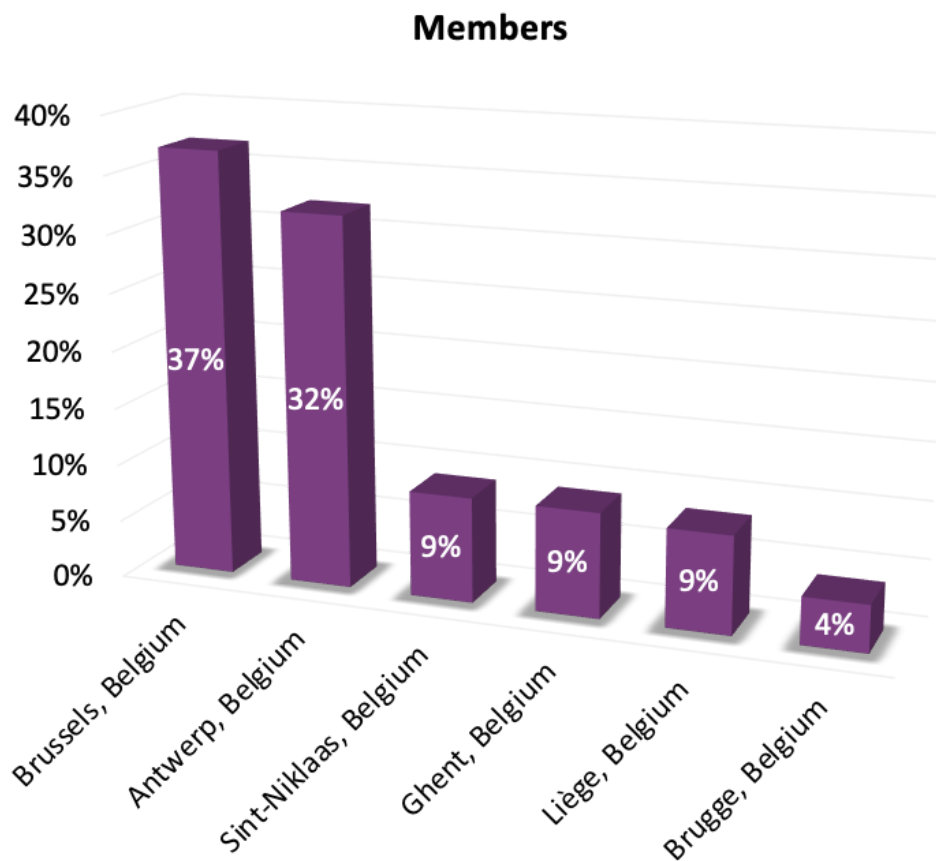
Members

Our Facebook members are from the following regions
Source: "Facebook Group insights Members Report"

Age & educational background of our women's community

Most of the women from RWAN's community are young adults between 20-29. As the graphic below shows, more than half have obtained academic degrees, including both Bachelor's and Master's degrees.

Age

Educational level
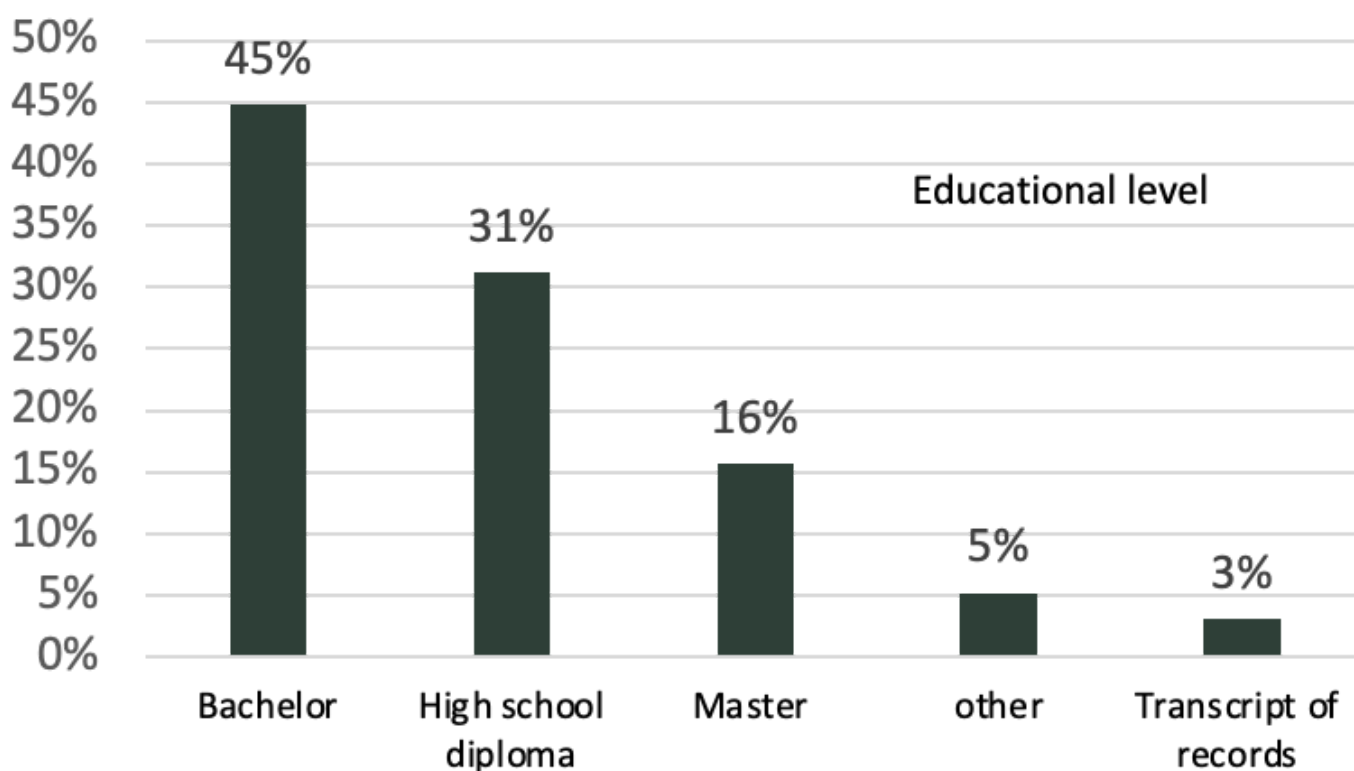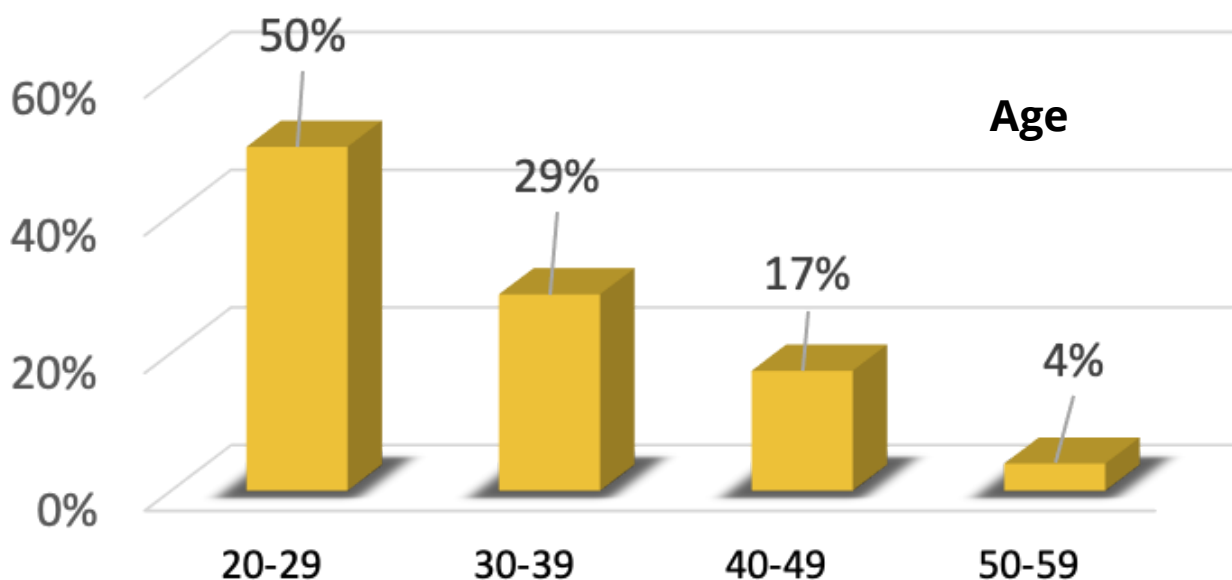
General overview

In our highly interconnected world, digital skills are becoming more and more essential. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of technology and increased our reliance on it. At the same time, the global health crisis has also drawn attention to the digital gender gap, with women and girls still lagging behind in accessing digital technology and digital literacy.

The 'digital divide' describes "the gap between individuals, households, businesses, and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access ICT and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities" (Davaki, 2018, p. 8). Within this overall digital divide, a digital gender divide has been identified where women are less able to access and use ICTs than men (Davaki, 2018).

The importance of ICTs for women's empowerment is recognized in Target 5.B of SDG 5, Gender Equality (Davaki, 2018). Without digital skills and access to technology, women and girls' very ability to communicate — let alone to access education and the labor market — is compromised. A report by the United Nations (2018) revealed that globally over 90% of jobs already require at least basic digital skills, a proportion that is destined to increase in the near future. This exacerbates pre-existing gender disparities, thus making it clear that no real gender equality can be achieved without filling the digital gender gap.

The root causes

According to UNICEF East Asia & Pacific (2021), the lack of digital literacy is — together with limited access to devices and poor-quality infrastructure — one of the main factors leading to the digital gender gap.

Socio-cultural norms, gender stereotypes, gendered division of labour as well as institutional practices and financial restrictions complete and complicate this already complex picture (Sey & Hafkin, 2019). Even when it comes to mobile phones — which are cheaper than computers and potentially more readily available — women lag behind men. And irregular access to technology means fewer opportunities to develop and enhance their much-needed digital skills. Indeed, women and girls make up the majority of the 3 billion people who are offline across the world (Sey & Hafkin, 2019). In addition, the more expensive and sophisticated the tools, the higher the gender gap. Furthermore, digital tools are mainly designed by men for men, without taking into consideration the platforms and devices used by women and girls. Quite worryingly, limited digital literacy also tends to increase the exposure of women and girls to digital harm and online risks of various kinds (UNICEF East Asia & Pacific, 2021).

A photo from one of RWAN's workshops

General overview

ICT training: Bridging the gender digital divide

There is no silver bullet solution to close this gap produced by several interconnecting factors. However, promoting ICT training for women and girls is clearly an essential step to take in order to overcome traditional gender barriers and empower women and girls, online and offline (Sey & Hafkin, 2019). Providing women with the necessary tools is another essential measure.

At RWAN, we have long acknowledged the importance of both aspects. Even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we noticed that many participants were unable to communicate with us via email, register through Eventbrite to attend our workshops, find the information they needed on universities' websites or Google, search and apply for scholarships or other opportunities due to the lack of basic computer skills. Furthermore, most of them had never used a computer in their home countries, and in their host country the language barrier became an insurmountable obstacle.

Hence, many women expressed the need to attend a basic ICT course in their mother tongue. With COVID-19, this desire has turned into an absolute necessity. Before RWAN started the ICT training in Arabic, our organization launched a poll via Facebook and the results were indisputable. Within the first 14 hours, more than 200 women responded positively expressing the desire to attend such courses. The project was rolled out and led to more than 30 hours of training, during which 50 women could learn computer basics, the fundamentals of the Internet and

online correspondence, Microsoft Word and PowerPoint (Word processing and handling) as well as Internet communication programs (Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams).

Across the world and, in particular, in the European Union, measures are being taken to close the gender digital gap. This, research shows, would be beneficial not only to women, but to society as a whole.

Significantly, the Women active in the ICT sector 2013 report by the European Commission reveals that if gender equality were reached in terms of digital jobs, the European GDP would increase by almost 9 billion euros on a yearly basis (European Commission, 2013).

CHALLENGES THAT HINDER WOMEN FROM GAINING ICT SKILLS

Many factors that create barriers for women to gain and access ICT skills have been identified both through RWAN's projects and other projects throughout the European Union. These barriers include social norms about the appropriate behaviour of women, cultural attitudes, the gendered division of labour, gender stereotypes, and gender based violence (Davaki, 2018). Despite a number of projects to address the digital gender divide, statistics show that within the EU there are still more men than women using the internet as a tool for everyday skills (Davaki, 2018).

With this in mind, the importance of digital literacy training in order to empower more women with ICT skills is undeniable. RWAN identified this gap in services being offered to many new European women and provided workshops and training to address these barriers in digital literacy.

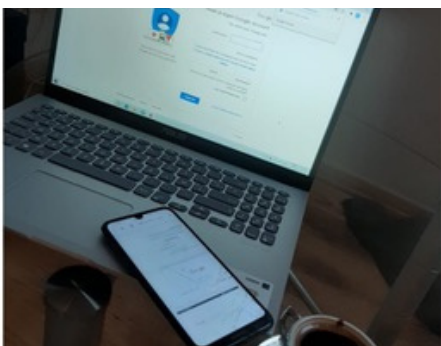# RWAN's contribution to solving these challenges

RWAN also presented additional helpful instruments and resources available online, such as Canva, an online graphic design tool (https://www.canva.com), and the Europass website to create a CV (https://europa.eu/europass/en). These tools make it easier to guide the women in advancing their ICT skills.

Participants were provided with training for the following skills:
- Basic skills to use a computer and manage files and settings;
- Basic skills related to internet surfing and internet searches;
- Learning to send and receive emails and correspondence, and using Google Drive;
- Basic skills related to the use of Microsoft Word and Powerpoint.

After each lesson, the lecture file was sent via the WhatsApp group and via email to allow the participants to review what they had learned.

A special curriculum has been developed for this training considering the basic needs that contribute to the integration of women into society and enabling them to problem solve during the COVID-19 pandemic. When women choose to participate in RWAN's ICT training workshops and share their aspirations, expectations and inputs, they allow RWAN to identify their problems or needs and attempt to find a solution.

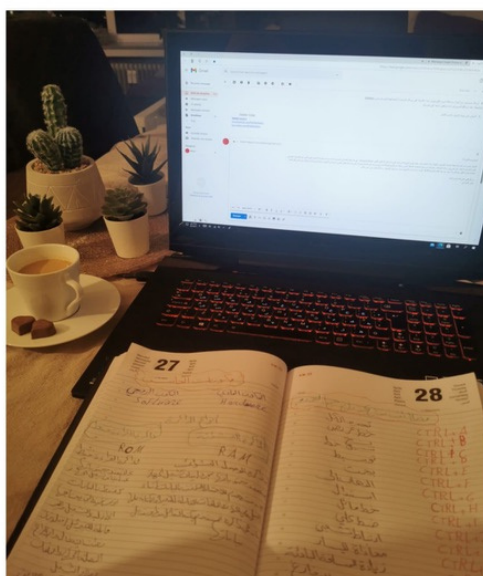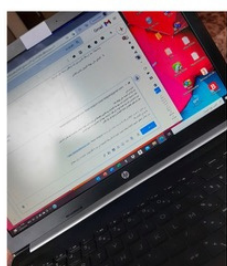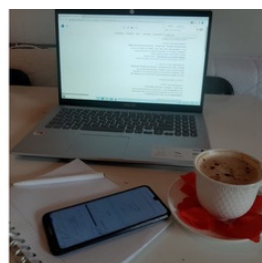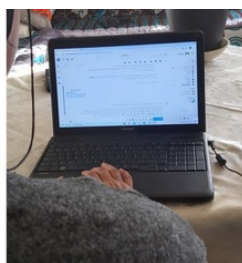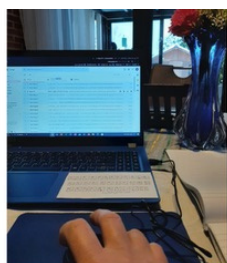*Pictures from RWAN's digital literacy course shared from our students*

RWAN's contribution to solving these challenges

In order to overcome these barriers to ICT that are faced by women, RWAN provided a number of ICT training workshops presented in English, French, and Arabic. Holding these workshops in Arabic allowed many more women from immigrant or refugee backgrounds to attend.

More than 90 percent of the participants had not taken part in previous RWAN's initiatives. Furthermore, as the workshops were required to be online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our team provided supplemental support on how to download and use Zoom. This extra guidance, along with the workshops, was organized via a WhatsApp group.

At the end of the course, RWAN offered two workshops on creating a resume using the new computer skills gained from the digital literacy workshops.

In order to continue to provide high-quality learning and tangible outcomes to allow these women to successfully integrate into European society, RWAN collected feedback after each workshop to assess our progress and to identify where improvements can be made.


Pictures from RWAN's digital literacy course shared from our students

Digital literacy training outcomes

Through our **ICT workshops**, participants acquired useful **digital literacy** skills. Women were able to develop basic computer skills, learn the fundamentals of the **Internet and correspondence** as well as the use of Microsoft Word, Powerpoint and **online communication tools**, such as Skype, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. Learning these skills has enabled the participants to confidently use a computer for a variety of tasks.
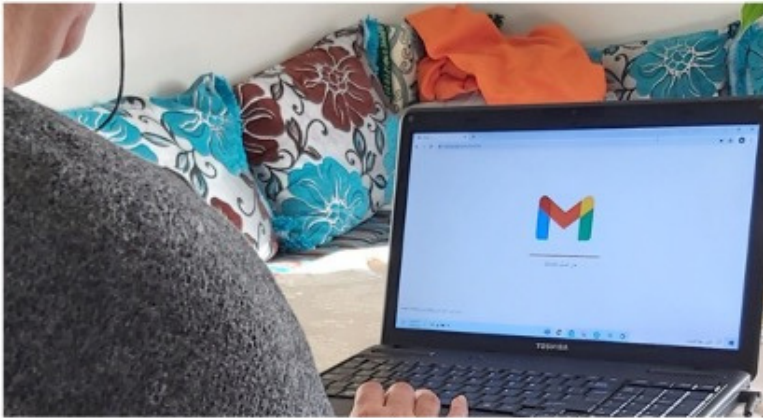
Feedback from participants after attending RWAN's ICT workshops.

I registered for this course to learn how to use a computer. This is very important as it will allow me to work in the computer field and attend online courses. The computer has become very important with the outbreak of COVID-19 and being able to use it has become a critical skill. As of now, I have learned how to send emails, copy and paste, transfer images from my phone to my computer via Google Drive, delete files and search history, change the keyboard to Arabic, and copy & paste.

My main reason for taking this course is to learn how to use the computer given that it is an important skill for me to have because everything is currently taught online. The computer became the most important thing with the outbreak of COVID-19 and learning how to use it has become a critical thing. As of now, I have learned how to send emails, delete files and search history, change the keyboard to Arabic, and copy & paste.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to participate in this course given that online learning and remote working have become the norm because of COVID-19. I felt the importance of computers in our lives, and so I registered for this course where we learned basic computer skills and corresponding via the internet. As such, I hope to continue with you to the end of this course.

I registered for this course to expand my digital skills and learn how to deal with a computer more effectively and efficiently. This will allow me to gain an education given that the computer has become an integral part of life, especially with the current circumstances. This course has been one of the most important experiences for me as it has given me new skills and enabled me to remember information I had forgotten. I look forward to learning more in the future and taking higher-level courses. I am unable to assess myself as computer skills are a vast ocean of information. However, I would give myself a 6/10, which is a good place to start.

RWAN's recommendations to support women in technology

Provide digital training in several languages.

Analyze women's needs, taking into account the factors affecting them such as educational background, experience, location, and society.

Take into account the challenges women face in participating in the workshops.
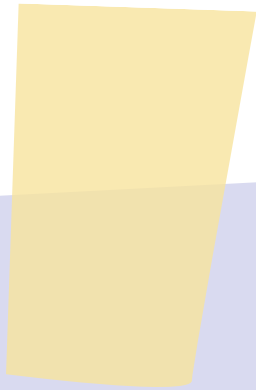
Provide the necessary tools that contribute and facilitate the entry of more women into the digital field.

Motivate and raise women's awareness about the importance of digital skills.

Civil Society Calls

Specific calls to support more women receiving computer skills training through our organization.We invite you to:

1.Donate to our project

We run entirely on grants and donations to supply free, personalized integration services for women.

The current donations will support the digital literacy skills project for women through two phases:
- Costs related to the project (trainers' fees, printing, Microsoft Office subscription license for participants).
- Provide any needed supplies that will support the women in joining the training (transportation, computers, headphones, cables, etc.).

If you believe in our project and want to support us, kindly make a donation to:
Name: RWAN ASBL
IBAN number: BE29 3632 1181 1664

2. Support us through partnerships

Develop partnerships with us that contribute to our support for the sustainability of our project by supporting more women.
If you require more information please contact us at Rwan.belgium@gmail.com

Credits

RWAN would like to give a special thanks to
- All institutions and organizations that participated with us to support the social integration of women into society.
- All participants who trusted us and attended our workshops.
- Our entire volunteer team for their contributions and commitment to working towards achieving these great results.
- Mariateresa Signorile for supporting the review of the report.

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