

Application for the 2024 Minerva Informatics Equality Award

Women+ in IC
EPFL, Switzerland

<https://wic-epfl.github.io>



Applicants

This application is made as a group on behalf of the Women+ in IC committee.

Applicants are the following:

Laurane Marco, laurane.marco@epfl.ch, President

Mathilde Raynal, mathilde.raynal@epfl.ch, Vice-President

Jade Mai Cock, jade.cock@epfl.ch, Treasurer

Yist Yu, tingyang.yu@epfl.ch, Committee member

Burcu Yildiz, burcu.yildiz@epfl.ch, Committee member

Abstract

Women+ in IC is an association that aims at promoting the representation of women, non-binary and agender peers (denoted women+) within the informatics and communication (IC) faculty of EPFL, the federal polytechnic school of Lausanne, Switzerland. Our events promote the research of women+ in IC, foster solidarity, help women+ network across all academic bodies (students, PhDs, staff members, professors), and encourage our entire faculty to take part in (inter)national feminist initiatives. Additionally, they offer a dedicated space for women+ to safely and freely express themselves, helping them grow both academically and personally.

Description of the initiative

Switzerland is a small country in central Europe with a mostly conservative population, and a direct but slow democratic system, meaning that social change takes time. This is particularly well illustrated by the fact that, in one Swiss Canton, women gained full rights to vote in 1990 only, following a ruling of the Swiss Federal court ([1]). This means that the patriarchal structure is still deeply rooted within the swiss political and cultural system, as is shown, by the scarcity of childcare solutions leading to traditional family dynamics and a higher mental load falling on women's shoulders; the non-enforcement of the swiss law on equal salaries, and the non-participation of Switzerland to the Convention 190 (Violence and Harassment) of the International Labour Organization.

EPFL is one of the two Swiss Polytechnic schools, located in Lausanne, Switzerland. By its offering of technical subjects only, it is naturally prone to a higher male-female ratio, due to historic tendencies of male being a majority in STEM related subjects ([2]). Compared to Swiss universities the gender ratios at EPFL are extremely unbalanced. Over the last 10 years, 29.5% of EPFL wide students are female, a number that is even lower in the Informatics and Communication (IC) faculty where 17.5% identify as female among students ([3]), and only 16% amongst professors (9/56) ([4]). This, combined with a competitive spirit groomed and maintained by EPFL ([5], Chart 8) in order to secure its spot among top universities, leads to an environment where sexism is still frequent. The *2021 EPFL Culture of Respect* and *2022 Mental Health* surveys illustrate this by showing that, comparatively to men, women and other genders generally feel less safe at EPFL ([5], Chart 5); are less satisfied with the gender balance in science careers and in administrative and technical roles ([5], Chart 13); are more prone to receiving inappropriate or derogatory comments ([5], charts 18,20), being discriminated against ([5], Charts 19, 23), being subject to violence and/or psychological harassment ([5], Chart 27), being the subject of unwanted physical contact or sexual assault ([5], Charts 36, 36b); are at higher levels of exhaustion ([6], Figure 4) on all *academic* levels ([6], Figure 8); rate their mental health as significantly worse ([6], Figure 9); and experience and witness more obvious and probable bullying/mobbing ([6], Table 6, Figure 2). In reaction to this environment, several initiatives have been launched such as "Paye ton EPFL", an initiative by EPFL's association Polyquity, similar to "me too" denouncing cases of discrimination, sexism, harrassment and assaults (among which 33% of the faculty-specified most recent posts are from IC faculty), the launch of the [Trust and Support Network](#) by EPFL as well as initiatives such as the Sexual Harassment Awareness Days (SHAD).

Despite these important initiatives, there is still a lot of progress to be made to reach an inclusive and supportive environment. Particularly, the IC school boasts one of the lowest gender ratios amongst all EPFL schools and is known for its competitiveness and "tech bro culture" ([7]).

In this climate, the Women+ in IC initiative was born in September 2022, first as an individually-run initiative under the wing of the IC PhD Student association, and then, since September 2023, as an independent association with its own committee.

Our goals are threefold: promote the visibility of women+-led research in our faculty, support personal and academic growth, and offer a safe space for women+ to build a community. They are met through a wide range of events, fostering a safe and inclusive space for women+ in our faculty.

To achieve our first goal, promoting the visibility of research led by successful women+ individuals in the field of computer science, we organize monthly lunchtime seminars where a women+ member of the community makes a short presentation on their journey and work. Our advantage over regular research talks is that speakers often include personal details on their struggles and successes as women+ in our field, which opens up the discussion for genuine conversations on the reality of having a career in computer science, whether in industry or academia. From tenured professors to junior engineers, in theory, machine learning or systems, we strive to span all academic and industrial positions throughout the entire computer science field. The rich

diversity of profiles in our speakers enables women+ to easily identify and aspire towards role models, regardless of their personal goals and aspirations.

Still in the spirit of promoting and acknowledging women+'s achievements and simultaneously fighting the Matilda effect ([8]) in the field of computer science, we took the initiative to spotlight incredible women+ contributions semi-permanently on the risers of the famous Scala stairs of our university. In the main building of our faculty, taken by hundreds of students, staff and tourists, these stairs are thus a daily public reminder that women+ made essential contributions in computer sciences. This display was inaugurated on the 14th of June 2023, a key-date for women+ in Switzerland, as it has become the official national women strike/march day. For this occasion, we raised awareness on the issues of women+ in the workplace by showcasing *14th of June* signs in the Faculty, and writing relevant statistics on the blackboards of classrooms. On the day of, we organised a booth to share the struggles that women+ experience in the school, and collected suggestions about how the situation could be improved. We also distributed purple ribbons, symbol of support for the strike, and ran a *sign workshop*, also attended by students from other faculties. Similarly, to mark the International Women's Rights Day on the 8th of March, we created a small exhibition celebrating the impact of women+'s research. To make it interactive, and increase information retention, we mixed all of their achievements, prizes, and milestones, and let visitors match it to the appropriate figure.

Our second mission is to promote academic and personal growth, and support the transition from studies to academia or industry. To this end, our efforts are directed at organising events which stimulate interactions across women+ of different academic levels and foster skill developments in a safe space. For example, we organised two series of speed-chatting events, pairing up senior members of the faculty with junior ones to promote exchange and facilitate interactions between them. We also sponsor networking lunches after each of our seminars, encouraging people to have direct interactions with the speakers, share their experiences with one another and find some relatable role-models.

Furthermore, we actively look into collaborating with industries to offer various opportunities to our members such as skill-based workshops. Recently, we offered a Technical Interview Workshop with Google through their Women in Engineering initiative. It gave our members valuable networking prospects and supported them in their preparation of transitioning to industry. For the women+ who are too early in their academic journey to transition, we organise women+ only study sessions. Every Monday afternoon, we book a room with some refreshments and snacks to offer students a comfortable and safe study space away from the "bro culture" cultivated in the faculty, providing them with an opportunity to help each other in a supportive environment. This is particularly important as women+ have a harder time reaching out for help, particularly in male-dominated environments due to cultural or educational biases.

Last but not least, our third goal is to create safe spaces for our community to grow in. Most of the aforementioned initiatives implicitly contribute to this by helping women+ network and strive in our faculty. However, they are limited through either space or time. To take away these bounds, we aim to explicitly make the school a safer place by raising awareness around sexism and harassment in academia for incoming and current students, and push the doctoral school to actively enforce the code of conduct. To implement this, our members are active in or in contact with various commissions such as: the diversity, equality and inclusivity commission, the trust and support network of the school, the respect compliance officer, the computer science doctoral commission and the EPFL doctoral commission. Outside of the official structure of EPFL, our inter/national initiatives (8th of March and 14th of June) also contribute to raising awareness. Taking away these bounds within our school, however, is a long process. In the meantime, we created a telegram community which gives a safe channel for women+ members to communicate, build a community and get informed of all of our events!

Impact

In the first two years since its creation, the association has managed to bring women+ from different academic levels together in an informal context, to involve professors, administrative staff and undergraduate/graduate/doctoral students actively into the association or its events, to collaborate with the university for faculty wide manifestations, and to secure a stable (yet limited) budget. Indeed, though our association has been running on limited funds generously provided by the doctoral school of the IC faculty, and sometimes supplemented by generous donors (students, professors, or faculty), our will to create a safe community for women+ drives our organisation skills enough to offer consistent events throughout the year.

Our lunchtime seminars, with 8 instances, have become a staple in the general faculty seminar series and have boosted our visibility to professors and faculty members, some of them coming unprompted to help us in our initiatives, but not only. Attendees come from all levels of the faculty, including undergraduates students, graduate students, scientific and administrative staff, as well as faculty members (professors) inclusive of all genders. We usually expect 30-40 of them to attend the talks and following lunch, some coming regularly, and others spontaneously. Not only do these seminars increase the visibility of the women+ community in our faculty, having examples of women+ we admire and know overcome obstacles we meet, but also encourages women+ to stay in the field and pursue a successful career in computer science, or alternatively helps them to find a support system of individuals who experienced similar things.

The study sessions are a recent initiative which aims at building a resilient support network for women+ to help each other. It is not uncommon to enter a room where there are no women+, which can be intimidating and have women+ driven away from valuable lab sessions. To reduce the negative effect on their education, these sessions target both the academic side and personal side. For the former, the attendance of doctoral, graduate and bachelor students naturally brings TAs and students together. This space lets them support each other and study together, while building self-confidence that they belong to this school, contributing to the retention of women+ in computer science. For the latter, this space lets us create a bridge between doctoral students and under/grads as most committee members are doctoral students. It has already proven fruitful to exchange advice and create informal mentorship relationships.

Our skill-based workshop prioritising women+ attendants was a highly popular event with over 60 people registering in a couple of days, several of them requesting a higher frequency of these opportunities. This enthusiasm revealed a significant demand for career development events primarily orchestrated for women+. To answer that demand, we plan on offering more similar events to ensure that our members are better equipped to tackle challenges met in both industry and academia.

Several of our activities serve at promoting visibility and awareness such as the quotes on the main building stairs, recalling on a daily basis the contributions of women+ in computer science and the celebrations of national and international events promoting women+'s rights (June 14th and March 8th). As an example, on June 14th, over 100 purple bracelets were given away as signs of support by EPFL members.

Finally, we collected a few *unprompted* quotes received from several members of our Faculty, shared here with their explicit agreement, or otherwise anonymised.

"I fully support this endeavor, great idea." - Mathias Payer (EPFL IC professor)

"Such a fun and heartwarming event! Thank you so much for organising and can't wait for the next one" Clémence Altmeyer (IC Student)

"I congratulate you for the initiative." Sabine Süssstrunk (IC professor)

"This is a wonderful initiative." Barbara Jobstmann (IC Lecturer)

"Thank you very much for organising" (IC Student)

"Thank you for the invite and for leading this (much needed!) initiative." (IC professor)

"Congrats on your initiative." (IC professor)

“It’s really great to have you bring us together, such a gift to us all!” (IC staff member)
“Women like you is what brings hope, thank you so much!” (EPFL professor)
“Thanks a lot for your initiative !” - (EPFL staff member)
Thanks a lot for sharing and for inviting us to be part of your initiative. (EPFL staff member)
“ I greatly appreciated the existence and the activities of Women in IC. “ (IC Student)

This series of quotes, received as spontaneous replies to event invitations or as spontaneous follow up to events, conveys the enthusiasm shared by both IC faculty members and greater EPFL members for this initiative, as well as highlights the need felt and shared for said initiative.

We believe our association has a role to play in improving the lives and careers of our community members as well as the overall atmosphere of the IC school, one of EPFL’s fastest growing schools, helping it reach its gender balance goals as highlighted in its most recent evaluation [\[9\]](#).

Additional material

Website of the association: <https://wic-epfl.github.io>

Instagram page of the association: https://www.instagram.com/wic_epfl/

Remark. This submission can be considered as a runner up if it does not win the award, and be included as an exemplar of best practice in future Informatics Europe publications.

Licence: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 copy-right licence