

# Digital Municipalities

Fact Sheet 14

## What's in it for municipalities?

Smart City or digitalisation in rural areas: all over Germany, cities, municipalities, and local authorities are using digital technologies to improve key tasks such as energy supply, mobility, and administration. This is where the decisive groundwork is laid for digital transformation, both externally with regard to the digital infrastructure of the municipalities, for instance when it comes to education or economic development; and internally with regard to the municipalities' own administrative practices. As the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government shows, these transformations open a window of opportunity: Digitalisation processes mean change and there is an opportunity to shape newly emerging framework conditions in a way that leads to greater gender equality. For this to happen, the two cross-cutting tasks of digitisation and gender equality must be thought of and realised in an interlinked way – right from the very beginning. Digitalisation strategies play a crucial role in this. To design and develop these strategies in a gender equality-oriented way, the diverse life situations and needs of future users of digital technologies have to be taken into account. Decisions on technology can have a very different impact on men and women. One example is the question whether information is merely optimised for viewing on a computer screen or also for smartphones. Mothers often use breaks in their care work to do administrative tasks and paperwork. Such technical issues may thus determine whether these women can participate on equal footing in digital services offered by their municipality or local authority. This should be taken into consideration when designing and developing strategies.

To take gender equality considerations into account at an early stage, it is important to attain gender parity in the relevant bodies dealing with digitalisation as well as to involve staff with gender equality expertise, such as gender equality officers.

For the federal level, the Expert Commission for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government therefore recommends:

### Gender parity in bodies relevant to digitalisation

It should be examined whether the digital bodies on federal level – for their future relevance alone – should be designated as essential bodies in the sense of the Federal Act on Appointment to Bodies (Bundesgremienbesetzungsgesetz; in particular article 5 (1) BGremBG). This would oblige the federal institutions to work towards creating or maintaining equal representation for women and men in these bodies (article 5 (2) BGremBG).

This rule should also be applied for municipalities.

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**The digital transformation in municipalities is a window of opportunity to make services for citizens as well as internal processes gender equitable.**

## Services for citizens

### Online Access Act

Applying for housing benefit, dealing with passport matters or registering a motor vehicle: municipalities provide important services that citizens depend on. As of the end of 2022, the German federal, state and local authorities are obliged to offer their services digitally via online administration portals. This is stipulated in the Act to Improve Online Access to Administrative Services (Online Access Act, OAA, for short).

According to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the success of the OAA will be measured, among other things, by whether citizens and businesses accept and use the digital services. In order for the project to succeed, it is important to address issues already in the development phase and to involve users at an early stage: digitally, in real life and through outreach! The development of digital programmes and tools with which citizens will have access to administrative municipal services in the future should take into account the different realities of people with different genders, ages, language skills, etc. from the very beginning. In this way, new services could be created that have a positive impact on the quality of life of all citizens. An example: In the city of Osnabrück, parents can register their children for daycare online. This saves them having to write and apply to all the facilities individually. At the same time, the municipalities gain a better overview of whether they are fulfilling their legal obligation to offer a childcare place for all children over the age of one – or if they need to take additional steps.

The Expert Commission recommends that the Federal Government should be:

#### Considering gender-equitable and non-discriminatory technology design when awarding public IT projects

The Federal Government's Digital Strategy should anchor gender-equitable and non-discriminatory technology development as a strategy in the field of action "Innovation and Digital Transformation". When awarding publicly funded ICT projects, the requirement to design ICT systems in a gender-equitable and non-discriminatory manner should be implemented.

This recommendation can also be transferred and applied to the state and municipality levels.

### Space for founders/startups

There are various programmes at federal and state level to support entrepreneurs with counselling. Some of them are explicitly aimed at women. Municipalities can also take action and use their instruments for local economic development to promote female self-employment in digitalised sectors of work. This can include, for example, funding and support for co-working spaces or similar arrangements. Co-working spaces as a work and networking environment can provide an important infrastructure for digitalisation-related startups. To enable equal capabilities for all parents, some co-working spaces integrate childcare, for instance at the "Coworkingtoddler" project in Berlin. In addition, some emerging co-working spaces only accept women in order to offer an alternative to the often male-dominated organisational culture in the digital industry.

The Expert Commission recommends, among other points:

#### Designing analogue spaces for digitisation-related startups in a gender-equitable way

If public funds (at federal, state or municipal level) are used to establish co-working or similar spaces, a childcare infrastructure must be planned and established in order to promote better reconciliation of care work and self-employment.

Especially in rural areas, co-working spaces are a good way to support women in taking the step into self-employment in general and into digitalised sectors of work in particular. However, in rural areas, there is often a lack of corresponding services and spaces – even though locations such as village community centres and/or multi-functional local shops exist in many rural communities and towns. At these locations, the establishment of corresponding co-working workplaces and meeting points could be realised with comparatively low investment costs and effort.



The brochure „Shaping digitalisation towards gender equality: 101 recommendations for action“ [Digitalisierung geschlechtergerecht gestalten: 101 Handlungsempfehlungen] compiles all (policy) recommendations from the report of the Expert Commission to the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government.



## Perspectives for employees

### Remote work

The COVID-19 pandemic has given a significant boost to mobile and remote work, also in public administration. To enable work to be done away from the workplace, additional digital devices such as laptops or smartphones were often purchased. These will continue to be available in the future and can thus continue to be used. The demand for remote work stays high in many administrations as remote work shortens commuting times and offers in particular people with care responsibilities new opportunities to coordinate employment and care work.

However, remote work also leads to a blurring of the boundaries between care work and employment. For instance, constant professional reachability via mobile phone outside the workplace as well as private availability during working hours can lead to increased stress. Moreover, in organisations where performance is still defined and measured by (long) physical presence, home office work may have a negative impact on “invisible” employees.

The Expert Commission recommends a genuine legal right to remote work, flanked by further protective mechanisms:

#### Legal regulations for remote work

Remote work must be regulated by legal provisions. In 2020, the Expert Commission published a position paper with concrete proposals in the following areas: anchoring and supporting the legal right to remote work, ensuring the voluntary nature of remote work, guaranteeing occupational health and safety protection as well as working time protection, guaranteeing data protection, guaranteeing protection against indirect discrimination as well as against discrimination due to the uptake of remote work, providing suitable equipment and offering reimbursement for expenses, anchoring accident insurance for remote work, especially when working from home, and expanding tax deductibility.

As long as there is no genuine legal right to remote work, appropriate regulations should be made in service and work agreements. For example, it must be ensured that remote working time is recorded in accordance with the requirements of German working time law.

### Administration processes and digitalisation-relevant competences

The digital transformation is altering work processes in local governments. This also entails new demands on the employees. For example, employees who now process citizens' applications digitally need new skills to be able to use the corresponding software. Others who work in the front office need to be trained in conflict management, as they will be dealing with the more complicated cases for which digital submission and processing was not possible.

It is important that these skills are appreciated and taught in trainings. Often, the – mostly female – employees are expected to acquire the corresponding competences themselves as a “training on the job”. Even beyond this obvious need for training, there is also demand and requirement for further training in digitalisation-related competences. These include, for instance, the competence to search for information online and to assess it with regard to its seriousness and credibility. Moreover, they encompass the ability to communicate via digital channels or to produce digital video and audio formats and content. In addition, knowledge of data and privacy protection and how to deal with respective dangers in the digital space is important.

In order for all employees to benefit from this, training programmes must be designed in a gender-responsive way. Statistics show that men still participate more often in further training and education than women.

The Expert Commission recommends:

#### Imparting digitalisation-related competences in all phases of the life cycle independent of gender

Digitalisation-related competences must be conveyed in a gender-competent manner throughout the entire life course, from early childhood education, via school education, at vocational schools and universities, to general and in-company further training and education.



Legal right to remote work. Statement by the Expert Commission for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government on the planned reform, 19 October 2020.





## Protection against cyber harassment at the workplace

Sexual harassment at the workplace affects all professions. As employers, municipalities must protect their employees in a preventive manner, punish offences and support those affected.

With digitalisation, new forms and tools are emerging to perpetrate gender-based violence and sexual harassment. From hate speech in social media, to the publication of intimate images online, to cyberstalking by means of geo-data localisation. One may thus speak of a new quality of violence – which creates new challenges such as protection against sexual harassment during work/at the workplace. A study commissioned by the German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency shows that sexual harassment at the workplace is increasingly taking on the form of cyber harassment. This involves, for instance, emails or messenger messages with sexualised or pornographic content.

Cyber harassment is a particularly far-reaching form of digital violence: repeated attacks place a heavy psychological burden on those affected. Cyber harassment is often accompanied by fear of physical assault, as a study by the Council of Europe's Cybercrime Convention Committee (T-CY) points out. The Expert Commission therefore recommends, among other points:

### Developing and advancing labour protection

Occupational health and safety must be advanced and further developed with regard to digital violence. To this end, it must be made clear that cyber harassment and other forms of sexual harassment in working life fall under the protection against discrimination according to the German General Equal Treatment Act (Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz, AGG).



Implementing this recommendation would result in greater legal certainty for those affected. In addition, works councils and equality officers could ensure that forms of digital violence, such as cyber harassment, are included in company and service agreements or in voluntary commitments to protect against sexual harassment at the workplace. In this context, employee groups that are particularly at risk due to the new quality of violence in digital communication should be specifically targeted. This includes, for instance, employees in the field of social media or who have direct contact with customers.



### Further reading

- » The Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government is available at <https://www.bmfsfj.de/gleichstellungsbericht>
- » Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft kommunaler Frauenbüros und Gleichstellungsstellen (2021): Flensburger Erklärung: Gleichstellung digital – Grenzen überwinden – Horizonte erweitern, 26. Bundeskonferenz in Flensburg.
- » Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg (2020): Gleichstellung in Digitalstrategien. Gender Mainstreaming-Leitfaden für digitale Angebote.

### IMPRINT:

Fact Sheet by the Agency for the Third Gender Equality Report  
 Publisher: Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik e.V.  
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 Currently effective version of: July 2022  
 Year of publication: 2022