

Breaking the **Glass Ceiling**

Giving Voice to
Hard of Hearing Women Leaders



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On 11 March 2026, in connection with International Women’s Day, the European Federation of Hard of Hearing People (EFHOH), together with the International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People (IFHOHYP), hosted the webinar **“Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Giving Voice to Hard of Hearing Women Leaders.”**

The panel discussion brought together hard of hearing women from different generations and professional backgrounds, reflecting a range of perspectives across advocacy, policy, education and the workplace.

A clear message emerged: **gender equality and accessibility must advance together**. Representation is not only a matter of visibility, but a condition for inclusive decision-making. When hard of hearing women are present in leadership and institutional spaces, their perspectives contribute to shaping more inclusive environments, policies and practices.

This report builds on that exchange. It brings together the perspectives, experiences and reflections shared by the speakers as they navigate leadership, visibility and inclusion across different contexts. Drawing on their contributions, it highlights both the structural barriers that persist and the strategies, resilience and self-advocacy through which these are addressed in practice.

Together, these testimonies form a collective record of lived experience. They capture not only the substance of the discussion, but also what it means to participate, to lead, and to be heard in environments that are not always designed to be accessible, and that must become more inclusive by design.

“You need to show up, even when spaces are not designed for you.”

Karina Chupina

*Senior Disability, Equity and Inclusion Expert;
EFHOH Representative at European
Disability Forum Women’s Committee*



Karina Chupina spoke about a familiar but often unspoken reality: being underestimated before even having the chance to demonstrate competence. She described facing **“doubts about my ability to lead meetings and manage complex negotiations”** and the experience of being **“seen as a disability first and not a competence.”**

Beyond assumptions, she highlighted the constant effort required just to be included — having **“to explain the access needs”** repeatedly.

Over time, she reframed this experience. Instead of trying to minimise her hearing loss, she turned it into expertise, building authority in accessibility, policy and inclusion, and entering spaces that were not designed with her in mind.

Her advice is direct and grounded in experience:

Hard of hearing women should not exclude themselves from opportunities. Even when spaces are not accessible, **showing up matters**, not only for individual growth, but to shift expectations and systems from within.

“Know your rights. That is where confidence starts.”

Olivia Lori

*EU Influencer and Communication Officer,
European Youth Forum*

For Olivia Lori, one of the most persistent barriers is invisibility.

As she explained, **“one of the main stereotypes I encountered is that I don’t look like having a disability,”** which often leads people to **“forget about my accessibility needs.”**



This invisibility is not **neutral**, it shapes access to opportunities, participation in meetings, and even recruitment processes. When accessibility is not visible, it is often not provided.

Her journey toward leadership was closely tied to confidence, but not in an abstract sense. Confidence, for her, came from understanding her rights and recognising that access is not a favour, but an entitlement. As she put it, when you know your rights, **“no one can tell you otherwise.”**

Her advice to other hard of hearing women is both practical and empowering:

Building confidence takes time, but knowing your rights is a turning point. It shifts the dynamic, from asking for support to claiming it.

“You don’t have to be exceptional to be valid”

Marina Corneliu

President of the Better Inclusion Association and organizer of the B-Inclusive Festival.

Marina Corneliu challenged a deeper layer of the conversation: the expectations placed on disabled people to constantly perform strength, resilience or inspiration.

Referring to the concept of **“inspirational porn,”** she described how people with disabilities are often framed as **“superhero[s]”** — a narrative that can be just as limiting as exclusion.

She also spoke openly about the pressure to overperform, sharing that she has felt the need to **“work five times harder just to prove myself.”**

Her response has been to take a different approach rooted in normalisation. Rather than presenting disability as something exceptional, she speaks about it openly, casually, and without discomfort. This, in turn, allows others to engage more naturally, ask questions, and eventually become allies.

Her advice is both personal and political:

You do not have to prove your worth through constant performance. **You are allowed to be ordinary, to be vulnerable, and to exist without explanation.** Inclusion starts there.



“If you don’t speak up, the system will not change”

Nicole Sophie Marinos

Disability Advocate

Nicole Sophie Marinos focused on the everyday reality of exclusion, not as a single barrier, but as a series of small, cumulative obstacles.

As she explained, **“people do not realise how access can exclude us from being able to participate fully.”**



This can take many forms: inaccessible meeting environments, unclear communication, or expectations that do not take hearing loss into account. In these situations, participation often depends on one thing: self-advocacy.

But as she emphasised, **“you have to advocate all the time.”**

Over time, this constant advocacy became a form of leadership, not only improving her own conditions but also shaping more inclusive environments for others.

Her advice reflects this experience:

Advocating for yourself is not always easy, but it is often necessary. And when you do, **you are not only changing your own situation — you are opening the way for others.**

“It takes time, but you can get there”

Chloe Want

President, International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People

Chloe Want shared the experience of navigating multiple disabilities while trying to access education and professional opportunities.

One of the most challenging aspects, she explained, is the need to constantly prove capability. In her words, she has had to **“work extra hard to prove that I can do it.”**

She also pointed to structural gaps in accessibility, noting that **“we don’t have easy accessible access”** to tools like captioning, even when they are essential.

What supported her was not a single solution, but a process: meeting others with similar experiences, participating in study sessions, and gradually discovering what support exists and what is possible to ask for.

Her advice is grounded in that journey:

Confidence does not come immediately. It builds over time, through experience, support and persistence. Even when progress feels slow, it is still progress.



Conclusion

The experiences shared during the discussion demonstrate that the barriers faced by hard of hearing women are structural and rooted in the intersection of gender inequality and persistent accessibility gaps, which limit participation in education, employment, healthcare and leadership, despite broader progress on gender equality across Europe..

The **European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030** sets out an ambitious framework to advance gender equality across all areas of life. To be fully effective, its implementation must explicitly integrate accessibility and align with **Article 6 (Women with Disabilities) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**.

From hard of hearing women's perspective, this requires greater attention to:

- ensuring access to real-time captioning, assistive technologies and inclusive communication in institutional, judicial and professional settings;
- addressing communication barriers in healthcare, including mental health and sexual and reproductive health services;
- improving the accessibility of services supporting survivors of gender-based violence;
- breaking persistent stereotypes by promoting diverse representation and inclusive leadership opportunities;

- strengthening the availability of disaggregated data on hearing loss and its gendered impacts.

The experiences shared during the discussion demonstrate that the barriers faced by hard of hearing women are structural and rooted in the intersection of gender inequality and persistent accessibility gaps, which limit participation in education, employment, healthcare and leadership, despite broader progress on gender equality across Europe.

The discussion also highlighted a persistent gap between policy commitments and practice. Participation too often depends on individual self-advocacy rather than on systems designed to ensure accessibility from the outset.

EFHOH therefore calls for the systematic integration of inclusive communication and hearing accessibility across the implementation of the Strategy. Advancing gender equality in Europe requires ensuring that all women can participate on equal terms.

A gender-equal Europe must also be accessible — by design.

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