2026

ZONTA INTERNATIONAL

ZONTA WOMEN IN STEM AWARD

Encouraging women to pursue education, career opportunities and leadership roles in STEM fields

The Zonta Women in STEM Award uplifts innovation and celebrates the remarkable accomplishments of women between 18-35 years of age in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields and acknowledge their groundbreaking research, pioneering discoveries, and/or exemplary contributions to advancing knowledge and innovation in a STEM field.

Zonta International offers 16 international awards of US$10,000 each and a complimentary one-year supporting membership in Zonta International for the next financial year.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Mary England

Citizenship: Canada
District 4

Pursuing bachelor's degree in materials and biomedical engineering at McMaster University, Canada

Mary England is in her final year of McMaster's materials and biomedical engineering program. She has always been passionate about STEM and has thoroughly enjoyed obtaining her undergraduate degree in engineering. She has taken part in various research opportunities within the engineering and biomaterials fields. She has had instrumental roles in investigating bone regeneration capabilities of novel DNA hydrogels using scanning electron microscopy, in addition to next-generation bone regeneration and imaging. She is also currently involved in a project investigating and optimizing a nanoparticle system for future radionucleotide delivery to tumor cells for cancer treatment.

Mary is an avid volunteer for Covenant House, a non-profit organization that helps homeless, trafficked and at-risk youth. Since 2019, she has organized non-perishable food drives and participated in her high school's Covenant House Sleep Out. This event involves participants sleeping outside for one night with only a sleeping bag and a piece of cardboard to raise awareness of the unhoused population's struggles and important funds. She brought these efforts to her university community, organizing further food drives and fundraisers, and launching the first Covenant House Sleep Out at McMaster in 2022. The event has continued annually, raising awareness of youth homelessness among students and staff.

Mary plans to continue her work in research while remaining engaged in volunteer efforts. In her free time, she enjoys playing hockey, hiking, baking and spending time with friends.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Sruthi Shanker Pydimarry

Citizenship: India
District 5

Pursuing doctorate degree in mechanical engineering at Case Western Reverse University, USA

Sruthi Shanker Pydimarry is a Ph.D. student in mechanical engineering at Case Western Reserve University, where her research focuses on understanding complex interfacial flows and developing physical models to predict flow behaviors in two-phase thermal management systems. Her long-term goal for her research is to bridge the gap between experimental measurements and next-generation computational modeling and eventually develop accurate design tools for future thermal engineers in electronics systems. She plans to continue in academia, fostering collaborations with aerospace and consumer technology industries. She aspires to develop machine-learning-based technology solutions for the thermo-fluids community that seamlessly integrate hardware and software systems.

In Sruthi's free time, she enjoys hiking at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, biking and running along the Shaker Lakes trail. She also enjoys recreating new recipes with an Indian touch.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Emily Murray

Citizenship: Canada
District 8

Pursuing bachelor's degree in software engineering at University of Victoria, Canada

Emily Murray is a fourth-year software engineering undergraduate student at the University of Victoria in Victoria, Canada. She is passionate about building technology that supports communities while helping create more inclusive spaces within engineering.

In her first year of university, Emily co-founded the Women in Engineering, Science and Technology (WEST) student organization. Through WEST, she has helped lead the creation of more than 10 industry-supported engineering design projects with both local and multinational partners. These initiatives provide students with opportunities to work on real-world engineering challenges while building professional skills and confidence. To date, the program has supported more than 300 gender-minority students in gaining hands-on engineering experience while fostering a stronger sense of belonging within the engineering community.

WEST's current project involves designing and building a pediatric MRI simulator for the children's department at Surrey Memorial Hospital. The simulator is intended to help young patients become familiar with the MRI experience before their appointment, reducing anxiety and improving the overall imaging process. As the current president of WEST, Emily leads a team of more than 40 students from across STEM disciplines who collaborate on design, research and community partnerships.

Emily frequently competes in engineering competitions and hackathons. At the 2025 Western Engineering Competition, Emily placed third with a web application she developed for caregivers who are providing care to family members. The platform gives caregivers access to resources, tracks care responsibilities and provides support resources while navigating complex care situations.

In her free time, Emily enjoys exploring nearby beaches and coastal trails with her dog, Minnie. She also likes crocheting, embroidery and is an avid reader.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Danielle Bartz

Citizenship: USA
District 9

Pursuing doctorate degree in marine biology at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, USA

Danielle Bartz is a final year Ph.D. candidate in marine biology at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She was born and raised in Pompano Beach, Florida and has had a passion for the ocean since an early age.

Danielle graduated cum laude from Florida Atlantic University in 2018 with a bachelor's degree in geoscience and biology. She also completed certificates in environmental science and advanced Geographic Information Systems, as well as a biology honors thesis.

After graduating, Danielle moved to Hawai'i Island to pursue her graduate research, which focuses on how sharks use coastal embayments as nursery habitats and how this changes over time given anthropogenic and environmental variables. Her interdisciplinary research combines techniques and practices drawn from the fields of social science, genomics and fisheries biology, to help answer pressing questions posed by the local fishing community.

Danielle is currently a member of the Hawai'i Cooperative Fishery Research Unit in Hilo and the president and founding member of the American Fisheries Society (AFS) Pacific Islands Student Subunit. She is an avid angler, animal lover and sustainability enthusiast who takes pride in hunting, catching, growing and gathering much of her own food. She is also passionate about volunteering at community events, ranging from invasive fish removal tournaments to beach cleanups to science education events for local school children.

In her free time, you can find Danielle fishing for dinner or freediving in the ocean, often swimming with sharks, riding horses in the native cloud forest, traveling to see friends and cooking.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Elise Merchak

Citizenship: USA
District 10

Pursuing doctorate degree in planetary sciences at University of Arkansas, USA

Elise Merchak is a fifth year Ph.D. candidate in space and planetary sciences at the University of Arkansas. Her interest in space sciences started in high school when she attended amateur astronomy club meetings in Lexington, Kentucky where she was the only female and the youngest member by at least 40 years.

Elise earned her bachelor's degree in astrophysics and astronomy from Butler University and is completing her Ph.D. focusing on mineral experiments simulating Venus and Mercury.

Elise is passionate about outreach and sharing astronomy with the public. She is committed to helping young students learn about science and hopes to incorporate education and outreach into her future career.

In Elise's free time, she enjoys playing board games and with friends, pickleball, rock climbing, ice skating and biking. She also spends time with her pet rabbits, Mitten and Milo.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Kayla Taylor

Citizenship: USA
District 11

Pursuing doctorate degree in electrical engineering and computer science at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, USA

Kayla Taylor was born and raised in Sarasota, Florida, and was inspired to study space science after reading Mary Pope Osborne's "Midnight on the Moon" from the Magic Tree House series as a first-grade student.

Kayla graduated from Riverview High School in 2017, where she worked extensively at the Riverview High School and Bishop Museum of Science and Nature planetariums. She is now working toward her Ph.D. in electrical engineering and computer science at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

Kayla also holds a bachelor's degree in astronomy and astrophysics with a minor in applied mathematics, as well as a master's degree in aviation with a specialization in space studies, both from Embry-Riddle. She has worked in many positions during university, including a resident advisor, writing tutor and a graduate teaching assistant for statistics and writing.

Kayla continues to work as a student assistant in the humanities and communication department, where she built working relationships with experts in digital literacy education, ethics, science communication and humanistic STEM (H-STEM). Her research interests focus on balancing the opportunity and impact of human innovation, scientific inquiry, artificial intelligence, transportation and space exploration.

Kayla is an avid technical writer and STEM communicator, and she enjoys working with her colleagues to conduct interdisciplinary research. She has conducted and published research on various STEM-related issues, from expanding opportunities for women in STEM to evaluating the effect of light pollution on ground-based astronomy. Her work serves to reimagine and support the aerospace and aviation industries.

In her free time, Kayla attends live theater performances, especially musicals, reads science fiction, travels to new places with her friends and family and develops her palate as an ice cream connoisseur.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Anya Grafov

Citizenship: USA
District 12

Pursuing doctorate degree in physics at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA

Anya Grafov is a Ph.D. candidate in physics at the University of Colorado Boulder, where she researches ultrafast magnetism and light-matter interactions. Working with the Kapteyn-Murnane group at JILA, she utilizes a tabletop extreme ultraviolet laser spectroscopy system to probe magnetic materials at their most fundamental limits. Her research investigates how magnetic and quantum materials behave over trillionths of a second when excited with light. By uncovering the mechanisms underlying these ultrafast behaviors, Anya's research aims to fill a critical gap in the understanding of magnetic phenomena, laying the groundwork for next-generation computational devices.

Anya is a dedicated advocate for diversity and inclusion in STEM. Motivated by her own experiences and her family's history as refugees from Russia, she strives to build supportive communities for underrepresented scientists. She recently served as co-chair and led the 2025 Conference for Undergraduate Women and Gender Minorities in Physics (CU*iP), an event that connected nearly 200 students with mentors, workshops and career resources. Additionally, she co-founded the JILA Association of Graduate Students (JAGS), an organization dedicated to fostering community, professional development and interdisciplinary collaboration at her research institute. Anya's long-time plans include pursuing a leadership career in the technology sector to drive innovation and build inclusive scientific communities.

Outside of science, Anya is a former US National Team member in acrobatic gymnastics. She remains involved in the sport as a coach, judge and athlete representative with USA Gymnastics, and recently started the only acrobatic gymnastics program in the state of Colorado. Anya also enjoys hiking, skiing and camping around the Rocky Mountains with her partner and dog.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Tiffany Ilott

Citizenship: United Kingdom and New Zealand
District 16

Pursuing doctorate degree in endometrial cancer research at University of Otago, New Zealand

Tiffany Ilott is completing her final year of a doctoral studies program at the University of Otago in Christchurch, New Zealand, where she is researching endometrial cancer and its associated risk factors. Before beginning her Ph.D., she completed a Bachelor of Science at the University of Canterbury followed by a Bachelor of Biomedical Sciences with honors at the University of Otago, Christchurch, an experience that ignited her passion for research.

As part of her doctoral work, Tiffany grows endometrial cancer cells in three-dimensional (3D) models that mimic native tissue in a laboratory environment. Additionally, she cultures fat cells donated by surgical patients in 3D, allowing her to develop a novel model that replicates the interaction between endometrial cancer and adipose tissue. Through this work, she investigates how the increasing prevalence of obesity may influence endometrial cancer development and progression.

Tiffany aspires to pursue an academic career, with the goal of continuing to develop advanced model systems for cancer research and contribute to improving health outcomes for women in New Zealand and worldwide. Alongside her studies, she works as an assistant research fellow at the He Taonga Tapu Cancer Society Tissue Bank, where she supports the collection and processing of patient samples for future research.

Outside of academia, Tiffany is an avid football and futsal player with the University of Canterbury club, where she has been a dedicated member for the past seven years. In her free time, she enjoys painting, knitting and tending to her vegetable garden.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Zijie Xu

Citizenship: China
District 17

Research assistant at the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Zijie Xu is a research assistant at the University of Hong Kong, specializing in big data statistical analysis. She received her Bachelor of Nursing from Fudan University in 2024 and completed a Master of Public Health with first-class honors at the City University of Hong Kong in 2025. In September 2026, she will begin pursuing a Ph.D. at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where her research will focus on artificial intelligence in healthcare.

Zijie's work lies at the intersection of clinical science, artificial intelligence, epidemiology and digital health. She is interested in using STEM approaches to advance health equity for vulnerable populations, especially women and older adults. Her previous research examined elderly patients' participation in medical decision-making and identified barriers related to health literacy, caregiver dynamics and structural inequities. She has also contributed to the development of AI-HEALS, an artificial intelligence–based health education intervention designed to support people with Type 2 diabetes through personalized, accessible and evidence-based guidance.

At the University of Hong Kong, Zijie is involved in large-scale population health research, using more than 20 years of electronic health records to study antipsychotic prescribing pathways and clinical outcomes. Her work integrates data engineering, statistical modelling and clinically informed interpretation to generate evidence that can inform policy and improve care for underrepresented groups.

Beyond research, Zijie is active in community service, including elderly care, gender-based violence advocacy, animal welfare and policy-related work on long-term care insurance. These experiences have strengthened her belief that science, service and social justice are deeply connected, and that meaningful progress in STEM should help build a more fair and compassionate and less violent world where both people and animals are respected.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Daisy Tsenesa

Citizenship: Zimbabwe
District 18

Pursuing a bachelor's degree in computer science at Ashesi University, Ghana

Daisy Tsenesa is a computer science student and aspiring researcher, interested in how artificial intelligence can be used to solve real-world problems. Her work focuses on building AI systems that are practical, accessible and designed with people in mind, especially in contexts that are often overlooked by mainstream technology development.

Daisy has applied this focus in dermatology. After learning about the severe shortage of dermatologists across many African countries, she co-founded and served as lead researcher for SheaGlow. Here, she collaborates with dermatologists and works on developing AI-powered skin diagnostics to help make dermatological assessment more accessible in underserved communities.

Daisy's research also explores the future of autonomous AI systems. In her undergraduate thesis, she examines computer-use AI agents, systems capable of interacting with digital tools the way humans do. The project investigates how such agents can plan and execute tasks across digital interfaces to support small businesses that rely heavily on social media and other online platforms. This work was accepted for presentation at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research.

Beyond her academic work, Daisy is also the founder of LITYY, an initiative that equips young girls in underserved communities in Zimbabwe with digital and entrepreneurial skills, mentorship and access to technology for economic empowerment.

Daisy hopes to contribute to the development of inclusive and socially grounded technology while encouraging more young women to see themselves as creators and innovators in STEM.

In her free time, Daisy likes to unwind from her academic work by roller skating.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Alyssa Peterson

Citizenship: USA
District 22

Pursuing doctorate degree in sustainable strategies to control mosquito-borne diseases at University of Queensland, Australia

Alyssa Peterson is a Ph.D. candidate and an American Australian Association Fellow at the University of Queensland and the QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute. Her research focuses on developing innovative, sustainable strategies to control mosquito-borne diseases. Her work centers on mosquito-specific viruses and their potential to suppress the transmission of harmful arboviruses such as dengue and Zika, offering a promising alternative to traditional vector control approaches.

Originally from the United States, Alyssa completed a Bachelor of Science and Arts at the University of Arizona, triple-majoring in biochemistry, molecular and cellular biology and religious studies. She graduated as valedictorian, ranking first among more than 15,000 students, while working multiple jobs and earning nine academic scholarships. During this time, she gained research experience in mosquito genomics, sparking a passion for applying molecular science to global health challenges.

Throughout her Ph.D., Alyssa has combined scientific research with leadership and community engagement. She served as president of the QIMR student society, increasing both student participation and fundraising, and continues to mentor students, teach undergraduates and contribute to institutional safety and governance. She also represents early-career researchers through the Australasian Virology Society and volunteers as a Wonder of Science ambassador, delivering science education to students and girls in regional and remote Queensland.

As the eldest of five sisters, Alyssa is committed to supporting women in STEM and hopes to establish a non-profit to expand access to science education for young women globally.

Outside of her work, Alyssa is rarely still. She has solo backpacked to more than 38 countries and loves to immerse herself in new cultures, especially within the context of religious anthropology. She also enjoys sewing, baking, journaling and spending time with her fiancé, who is also a virologist. She can usually be found hiking, practicing yoga, dancing or at karaoke.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Kate Johnson

Citizenship: Australia
District 23

Marie Sklodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow at Centre for Ecological Research and Forestry Applications, Spain

Kate Johnson grew up in Lutruwita/Tasmania, Australia, with a strong passion for nature. She completed her undergraduate and postgraduate studies in plant science at the University of Tasmania, where she also studied English, marine and Antarctic sciences, geology and geography.

Kate has since worked as a postdoctoral researcher in the United States, Switzerland and Spain. She is interested in understanding what underpins plant vulnerability or resilience to climate extremes such as drought, heat and freezing, in the context of climate change. As a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Ecological Research and Forestry Applications in Barcelona, she investigates how variation in plant characteristics may be related to their ability to survive drought.

Kate is also interested in science communication and the connection between science and art. She often paints the plants that she studies, with some being featured scientific journals covers. She has also collaborated with various artists on exhibits at the nexus of science and art.

In addition, Kate co-manages a volunteer-run, award-winning science communication platform and podcast, “That’s What I Call Science,” which aims to create engaging and accessible content around science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) for a general audience while providing a platform for underrepresented voices.

In her free time Kate loves painting, writing poetry and spending time in nature.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Sally Hurst

Citizenship: Australia
District 24

Founder, lead researcher and outreach manager at Found a Fossil, Australia

Sally Hurst is a paleontologist, archaeologist and science communicator whose work focuses on how humans discover, understand and protect the deep past. She is an adjunct fellow in the School of Natural Sciences at Macquarie University, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts in Egyptian archaeology, a Bachelor of Science in paleobiology and a master's degree in research. Sally's research explores the interactions between humans and fossils throughout history. She is a strong advocate for the protection of natural and cultural heritage, and the vital role the public plays in its discovery.

Sally founded the Found a Fossil Project, a first of its kind Australian initiative that provides clear, accessible guidelines for what to do if you discover a fossil or First Nations artifact. Built from a national survey and awareness campaign she conducted during her master's degree, Found a Fossil has since grown into a traveling outreach program delivering fossil, STEM and leadership sessions in schools, libraries, museums and community spaces.

Sally's fieldwork takes her around the world, from the deserts of Mongolia to the badlands of Canada, where she works on dinosaur digs that directly inform the stories she brings back to classrooms. To date, Sally has presented to more than 7,670 students from 386 schools across 12 countries, helping young people, especially rural kids and girls, see themselves in science.

Sally is a passionate advocate for widening participation in STEM and being the role model she never had. She recently authored "Found a Fossil," a book designed to help the public understand the importance of Australia's fossil heritage and how everyone can play a role in protecting it. In 2022, she was named a Superstar of STEM by Science and Technology Australia.

Outside of science, Sally loves freediving, scuba diving, surfing and sewing dinosaur-themed outfits.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Sarah Pappert

Citizenship: Germany
District 28

Pursuing doctorate degree in astrophysics at Technical University of Munich, Germany

Sarah Pappert is a doctoral researcher in astrophysics at the Max Planck Institute for Extraterrestrial Physics in Germany. Her work bridges instrument development and scientific analysis, with a focus on high-resolution observations of supermassive black holes and the development of next-generation astronomical instrumentation.

Sarah contributes to the development of key components for the Multi-AO Imaging Camera for Deep Observations (MICADO), a first-light instrument for the Extremely Large Telescope (ELT) in Chile. The instrument will enable observations with remarkable sensitivity and spatial resolution, opening an unprecedented window into the universe. Her research combines the design and implementation of advanced instrumentation with the analysis of observational data, allowing her to contribute across the full chain from technological development to scientific discovery.

Sarah completed her bachelor's and master's degrees in physics and technology for space applications at Technische Hochschule Mittelhessen and Justus Liebig University Giessen, graduating ahead of schedule with highest distinction. During her studies, she conducted research internships at the German Electron Synchrotron and the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy, where she contributed to the search for ultra-light dark matter by developing novel detection approaches.

For Sarah's master's thesis, conducted in the context of the International Space Station (ISS) experiment PK-4, she investigated the radiation resilience of artificial intelligence systems through simulations and irradiation experiments. Her work provided one of the first experimentally supported assessments of how radiation-induced memory errors affect AI reliability and identified key mechanisms governing fault behavior in neural networks.

Sarah is strongly committed to science outreach, increasing the visibility of women in STEM and fostering a more inclusive scientific community. She aims to encourage young people, especially girls, to pursue scientific careers and to support them in developing confidence in their abilities.

In her free time, Sarah enjoys spending time outdoors with her dog, Cookie.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Abinaya Arunachalam

Citizenship: Netherlands
District 29

Research program manager at University of Groningen, Netherlands

Abinaya Arunachalam is a researcher and program manager working at the intersection of science, technology and real-world applications. She is currently part of the Health Technology Research and Innovation Cluster in the north of the Netherlands, where she brings together researchers, clinicians and industry partners to accelerate the translation of fundamental research into healthcare solutions.

Abinaya recently completed her Ph.D. in polymer science at the University of Groningen, where her work focused on bioinspired adhesives, including insect-repellent glues inspired by carnivorous plants. She holds a master's degree in chemical product engineering from Delft University of Technology, Netherlands and a bachelor's degree with honors in chemical engineering from Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani – Dubai, UAE. Her academic work focused on developing solutions that can make a tangible difference in people's lives, such as creating humidity-responsive sensors to detect food spoilage and designing sustainable, bio-inspired pesticides.

In her professional role, Abinaya is committed to making science more visible, accessible and inclusive. She has mentored high school students through national initiatives and actively supports efforts to encourage girls to pursue careers in science and technology. Her science communication efforts have been recognized through features on national television, leading newspapers and science magazines, a nomination for the Jan Ritzema Bos Prize for science communication in plant health and an exhibition of her work in the university museum.

Abinaya aims to continue building a career that bridges research, innovation and implementation, while contributing toward a more inclusive and accessible scientific community.

In her free time, Abinaya enjoys experimenting with cooking, watchings films, exploring new places with friends and family and spending time with dogs.

2026 Zonta Women in STEM Awardee

Maja Nelde

Citizenship: Germany
District 29

Pursuing master's degree in mathematics at University of Münster, Germany

Maja Nelde is a master's student specializing in probability theory and its applications at the University of Münster. She developed an early interest in mathematics that she pursued through participation in the Math Olympiad, where she became interested in understanding not only what is true, but why.

Maja is motivated by the problem-solving process of mathematics, particularly the moment when, after hours of being stuck on a problem, everything falls into place like the pieces of a puzzle.

In addition to academics, Maja is passionate about her role as subject ambassador and a member of the student council, where she organizes events for high school students considering studying mathematics. She aspires to be a role model, especially for girls, to encourage students to pursue their interests in STEM regardless of stereotypes.

After completing her bachelor's degree in 2023, Maja interned at BMW in Munich, where her team developed a machine learning model to forecast development costs. The experience sparked her interest in modelling approaches and led her back to Münster to further specialize in probability with a focus on applications in physics and finance.

Maja later spent time at Imperial College London as a research fellow, working on the Lévy-Itô decomposition for independently scattered random measures, and has continued this project with the goal of publishing the results. After completing her master's degree, Maja plans to apply her mathematical background to real-world challenges.

In her free time, Maja enjoys playing tennis with a women's team she founded in 2022, training for her first half marathon and baking sourdough bread.