

Policy Agenda

Generation Equality Fora (GEF)

Technology & Innovation Action Coalition

MenEngage Alliance Joint Recommendations for Action Coalition Leaders

Rationale

The political, economic and social contexts we currently face have all been shaped by, and in turn shaped, the pace and nature of technological change, especially in relation to digital communications. Rapid technological change is affecting expressions and experiences of patriarchal masculinities. This means that gender transformative work with men and boys must develop a better understanding of the technological contexts in which it is operating, and both the challenges and opportunities created by technological change.

Anti-patriarchal work with men and boys has long had an interest in the role of media and communication technologies in maintaining patriarchal norms, and especially its role in socializing young men into patriarchal masculinities.^[1] Much of this work has focused on issues of media literacy in relation to the objectification of women and girls across many forms of media (from TV shows, to music lyrics, to advertising campaigns), and the role played by representations of violence (in movies, TV and computer gaming) in desensitizing boys and young men to patriarchal violence.^[2]

More recently, gender justice advocates have highlighted the impact of digital technologies in deepening the marginalization of women, girls and LGBTIQ individuals. In 2019, the number of internet users worldwide stood at 4.13 billion, which means that more than half of the global population is currently connected to the world wide web.^[3]

The number of smartphone users worldwide today surpasses three billion and is forecast to further grow by several hundred million in the next few years.^[4] But gender-based barriers continue to constrain women's access to and uptake of this digital connectivity. The Association for Progressive Communications, in its recent submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, notes that "[w]hether in terms of access, affordability, meaningful connectivity or digital literacy, women's overall participation in the digital space remains disproportionately limited."^[5]

At the same time, as a medium of both interpersonal communication and public discourse, the internet both reinforces and expands the operations of oppressive behaviors and hierarchies. In 2015, the UN Broadband Commission reported that **women were 27 times more likely than men to be targeted by tech-related violence.**^[8] A 2018 report by OHCHR emphasizes that women and girls "face online forms and manifestations of violence that are part of the continuum of multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of gender-based violence against women."^[9] This experience of online violence and digital exclusion is also affected by "intersectional forms of discrimination based on a number of other factors, such as race, ethnicity, caste, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, abilities, age, class, income, culture, religion, and urban or rural setting."^[10]

A growing body of evidence shows that the impacts of digital misogyny and online violence are limiting women's participation in public and political life.^[12] Recent research with college-aged women

participating in online political discussions in Colombia, Kenya and Indonesia found that they experienced similar types of violence including insults and hate speech, embarrassment and reputational risk, physical threats, and sexualized misrepresentation.^[13] The OHCHR report notes that:^[14] ***Women human rights defenders, journalists and politicians are directly targeted, threatened, harassed or even killed for their work. They receive online threats, generally of a misogynistic nature, often sexualized and specifically gendered. The violent nature of these threats often leads to self-censorship.***

Not only do digital misogyny and online violence have political effects; they serve specific political purposes and interests. Recognizing that digital technologies facilitate not merely interpersonal communication but political speech and action means that the political forces at work on the internet must be acknowledged.

As well, the extremist violence of misogyny itself has become evident with the increasingly serious incidents of violence that have been committed by young men predominantly in the United States and Canada who self-identify as incels (involuntary celibates).^[19]

Together with this important emphasis on the ways in which an ideological commitment to misogyny and male supremacy is manifest online, **it is also important to understand the logic of power, exploitation and oppression organizing the operations of internet platforms themselves.** There is a growing recognition that the ownership structures and network effects of “platform capitalism” concentrate power in unprecedented ways. The world’s richest corporations (including Google, Amazon and Facebook) have built their business empires on digital platforms, marketing them as open, innovative and liberating.

At best, this concentration of power results in a new paternalism, in which the freedoms and limitations of online speech, which increasingly is the medium of political life in many societies, are determined by platform content moderators rather than the rights of the citizen, or indeed the sovereignty of political institutions. At worst, the very possibility of rational public debate and decision-making is undermined by manipulation and exploitation of communication infrastructures, and the increasingly hidden nature of decision-making by automated systems and their algorithms.

Such a tool is designed into the commercial logic of platform capitalism. Where communication technologies used to be understood in terms of their capacity to create and share meaning, the digital communications of platform capitalism are fundamentally not about the articulation of meaning, but keeping our attention in order to extract and exploit our data. As Seymour explains:^[29] *On social media platforms, the incentive is to constantly produce more information: a perpetual motion machine, harnessed to passions of which the machine knows nothing. This production is not for the purpose of making meaning. It is for the purpose of producing effects on users that keep us hooked.*

At the same time, it is also true that digital technologies have opened up unprecedented opportunities for transnational activism and social justice movement building, needed now more than ever in the midst of the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. From #MeToo, to #BlackLivesMatter, to #GreenNewDeal, digital technologies have enabled political education and organizing across a range of social justice issues. That online educating and organizing can have powerful and immediate offline effects was clear in the protests that swept anti-democratic leaders from power in 2010-12, sometimes characterized as the Facebook revolutions.

But this activism and organizing is shadowed by the enhanced infrastructure of surveillance afforded by these same technologies, which serve as a reminder that digital security must be a priority for the

communication channels used by global social change networks, and especially women-human rights defenders.

The growing influence of media and online space on all aspects of everyday life and political debate, including expressions and experiences of patriarchal masculinities, means that the feminist systems change agenda is necessarily concerned with gender transformative work on media systems. Gender transformative work with men and boys can contribute to this agenda in a number of different ways, in solidarity with feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements. This should include continuing to develop and expand media literacy work, especially with boys and young men, **to help them understand the patriarchal effects of sexist representations of women and girls, as well as the desensitizing effects of media portrayals of violence.**

There is also an urgent need to develop more contextually-specific analyses of and responses to digital gender-based violence and men's involvement in the manosphere, including strategies for building alternate online community-building spaces for young men in particular, which can support young men in rejecting the misogynistic messaging they are often surrounded with online. Such alternative online communities can also become spaces for building trusting relationships of 'knowing', by sharing factually-based peer knowledge to counter the deliberate spread of false information, not least in relation to the local facts of gender inequalities.

Tactics

- There is an important role that men and boys can play in preventing and eliminating violence and discrimination against women, girls, LGBTQIA+ individuals and other marginalized groups within the virtual sphere, including challenging gender stereotypes and patriarchal power dynamics, harmful social norms, attitudes and behaviors that underlie, perpetuate and reinforced violence and discrimination within technology & communications platforms.
 - Developing communications campaigns, initiatives in the media and through programming that promotes non-violent actions, attitudes and values by men and boys, they can be encouraged to take an active part in efforts to prevent and eliminate GBV in the digital sphere.
 - Combine community organising work with transforming narratives at the media level and use technology and social media as a bridge to keep the conversation happening, in order to create shifts in how people perceive the issues
 - Working to bring together media and technology for community mobilization in grassroots work can be an extremely powerful tool
 - Gender transformative work with men and boys must develop a better understanding of the technological contexts in which it is operating, and both the challenges and opportunities created by technological change.
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