WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
PEACE & FREEDOM

Action Coalition 5: Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality

Interlinkages between the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda and the work of the Generation Equality Action Coalitions and the Compact for Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action

SUMMARY

Despite being heralded for their potential to achieve gender equality, technology and innovation have introduced new dangers for women and people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). The gender dimensions of technology are rooted in a wider context of how societies approach, use, and develop digital technology. This also means that technology is not neutral; rather, it reflects, enhances, and embodies many of the same characteristics and qualities of the offline world. In his 2018 address to the UN General Assembly, UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted that "the technological revolution is being used to discriminate against women and reinforce our male-dominated culture."[1] Furthermore, whether done intentionally or not, many innovations are designed with the embedded gender and other biases of their creators, and the intersecting structural inequalities of the offline world mean that even the most helpful technologies remain inaccessible to those who would benefit the most from them, including women, girls, and socioeconomically marginalised populations. Technologies can be helpful accelerators for change, but can also be weaponised to perpetrate gendered violence and warfare. A feminist approach, with its emphasis on structural transformation, inclusivity, human rights and human security, is critical to addressing the gender-related challenges wrought by technology and innovation in order to promote gender equality within, and through, them.

THE ISSUE

Background

Gender is an essential factor in our reliance on, need for, and use of technology and digital connectivity. There is a well-acknowledged gender gap concerning technological access and literacy, which flows from the larger 'digital divide' among and within countries, in which networks and information and communications technologies (ICTs) are unequally distributed among people for reasons of cost, quality, and availability, among other factors. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the proportion of women using the internet globally in 2019 was 48 per cent, compared to 58 percent of men.[2] Nevertheless, the internet may be a lifeline for women to pursue education, earn an income, or access information, including on sexual and reproductive health and rights, otherwise not available

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1 UN Secretary-General. 2018. "Address to the General Assembly." https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-09-25/address-73rd-general-assembly

2 ITU Backgrounder. n.d. "Bridging the Gender Divide." https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-thegender-divide.aspx

to them. Online platforms can offer much-needed emergency services, counselling, and psychosocial support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Furthermore, technological developments, including assistive technologies, can help enable people with disabilities to access their rights and fully participate in education, employment, and public life.

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Technology can also provide "safe" and enabling spaces for individuals and marginalised groups to associate, to share and seek sensitive information, and engage in online associations based on identities, which can be illegal or persecuted in some countries. Social media and chat platforms are particularly vital for women's organisations to track harassment and femicide as well as for peacebuilders and human rights defenders to mobilise. The UN Secretary-General's 2020 annual report on WPS addresses how technology and innovation holds the potential to advance gender equality as well as bolster women's participation in peace processes through inclusive digital technologies. This is exemplified by the fact that during the peace process in Afghanistan, women used social media to contribute to a US congressional hearing on women's inclusion in peace and security as a way to inform policymakers and mediators.[3]

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How do gendered social norms impact people's experiences with technology?

Harmful gender norms and biases deeply hinder the transformative potential of technology and impact women's experiences with online platforms. With the emergence of social media in particular, sexual, and intimate partner, and domestic violence has taken on new dimensions that include bullying, defamation, impersonation, surveillance, tracking, and harassment as well as non-consensual sharing of photos or messages, and is greatly exacerbated by the anonymity and impunity afforded by digital spaces. A recent report from the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel in Digital Cooperation states that in 2018, it was 27 times more likely for women and girls to be harassed online than men.[4] Furthermore, a recent Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) survey of 55 women legislators worldwide found that 81.8 percent of the respondents had experienced psychological online GBV, including high incidences of, often fake or doctored, humiliating or sexual images being circulated.[5]

In addition to causing lasting psychological impacts, online violence is also leading women to not partake in social media, exacerbating inequalities, in online and offline spaces alike. This, in turn, affects participation and diversity in everyday life: the pursuit of public office or political careers; peacebuilding efforts; and shrinking civic space, especially for women human rights defenders (WHRDs). The importance of addressing threats against and creating a safe environment for peacebuilders and WHRDs is among the core components of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2467 (2019) and 2493 (2019) specifically urging states to condemn and prevent all acts of intimidation and violence against civil society and human rights defenders.

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3 Danielle Robertson; Mena Ayazi. 2019. "How Women Are Using Technology to Advance Gender Equality and Peace." https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/how-women-are-using-technology-advance-gender-equality-and-peace

4 Report of the Secretary-General Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, June 2020, para 50, https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_EN.pdf

5 Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2016. *Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians.* http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf

How are new technologies being weaponised?

Gendered and patriarchal power relations and a militarised approach to security have also led to the heavy weaponisation of technology. Just as science led to the creation of the first atomic bomb, nuclear weapons are now being 'modernised' and made more deadly through technological innovation. Military powers and strategists talk increasingly about the role of artificial intelligence in military applications, and some have referred to cyberspace as the "fifth operational domain" of war fighting, while 3D printing means it's now possible to make a gun at home. The gendered culture of violent masculinity that surrounds new weapons development is now being extended to the creation of autonomous weapons. These "killer robots'' are designed with algorithmic bias in terms of gender, race, socioeconomic status, ability, and sexual orientation and programmed to "engage a target" (i.e., kill someone) with no human operator or control—different from armed drones or "un-crewed aerial vehicles'' (UAVs), which are remotely piloted by humans. If developed, autonomous weapons would rely on data to make life and death decisions, with the power to kill human beings or destroy buildings and other infrastructure. Considering that data collection is an activity which is inherently about labelling and categorising individuals through methods often predicated on existing binary gender norms, alongside other identifiers, the use of data, or breach of data security, can therefore have a more severe impact on the daily lives of women and people of diverse SOGIESC because of historical and structural inequalities in power relations.

A feminist analysis of technology and innovation also means questioning the role, and impact, of private-sector actors in our digital experiences. Because networked technology and its governance models have emerged in tandem with neoliberalism, women in developing countries originally formed the core labour force in the production of electronics or other components of technological devices, often with great cost to their physical and mental health. Furthermore, a 2018 study from the UN University's EQUALS Research Group states that women comprise 35 percent of the information and communications technologies field, with women making up as low as 2 percent in some sub-sectors of the workforce.[6]

What needs to change?

Achieving gender equality and addressing the gender-based challenges that come with technology and innovation will require transformative and inclusive solutions that are based firmly in human rights and human-centric understandings of safety and security. The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) stated for the first time in 2012 that "the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression." General recommendations from the Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) include updated understandings of gender-based violence against women to include "technology mediated environments" and recognise the underrepresentation of women in the use of information and communication technologies and calls to address conditions that impede access to relevant information and employment opportunities. Therefore, as long as technology is conceived of, operates within, and perpetuates patriarchal systems of oppression, it cannot be accessible, safe, and equal.

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6 Our World. 2019. "Advancing Research for Gender Equality in the Digital Age." https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/advancing-research-for-gender-equality-in-the-digital-age

The Generation Equality Forum, the Action Coalitions and the Compact for Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action present an opportunity to focus momentum and implement commitments on the Women, Peace and Security agenda to shape a feminist future. We urge UN Women, Member States, Action Coalition leaders and other stakeholders to ensure that the Women, Peace, and Security agenda is reflected in the priorities of the coalitions and the compact for continued implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its contribution towards the full realisation of human rights for all.

Priority actions

Translate existing international commitments on the gender dimensions of technology into national or local policies and law—and implement them. More accountability and follow-up are required to ensure that international commitments, particularly in the area of Women, Peace and Security, human rights, digital cooperation and internet governance, and under the Sustainable Development Goals, are not being de-prioritised in the context of new or "emerging" issues, which technology often is framed as. It is vital to listen to local voices and lived experiences when adapting global commitments to national contexts. A mapping of such commitments and streamlining across forums, when possible, would foster policy coherence and improve implementation, resourcing, and monitoring.

Challenge and transform the gender norms and stereotypes that impede gender equality and perpetuate discrimination and gender-based violence within technology-related fields of education, places of work, and daily life. The root causes of digital violence, discrimination, and exclusion have firm footing in the gender norms on which societies, relationships, and behaviour are based. Achieving gender equality within, and through, technology and innovation must not be equated with a simple increase in numbers or parity alone. Rather, it is about breaking down the barriers—both structural and interpersonal—that exclude and/or discourage women and other gender diverse people from developing skills, studying, or working in this field, and that enable online GBV to occur with relative impunity.

Recognise that harassment and threats online have repercussions offline and develop programs to prevent online gender-based violence. Gender diversity and women's participation in many fields is being limited and discouraged by online violence. Strategies and programs that seek to achieve women's participation in technology-based spaces must be coupled with those that hold perpetrators of violence accountable, and address the root causes of and prevent gender-based violence, which leads to self-censorship for women, and people of diverse SOGIESC, and shrinks already volatile civic space for women's human rights defenders. Technology must be protected as a means and medium for freedom and expression.

Stop the weaponisation of technology. Governments must stop the misuse of technology for the pursuit of violence and stop creating violence in digital spaces and other mediums where it does not otherwise occur. Governments and international organisations must embolden and humanise technology and innovation through feminist peace perspectives. Specifically, states should support a ban on autonomous weapons and cease the development of offensive cyber 'weapons'. Additionally, they should curb the use of digital technologies for policing and surveillance, including technologies such as artificial intelligence and facial recognition. Scientists and technologists must be called on to assess any unintended consequences or use of the technology they develop, and to hold one another to account. Technology companies and industry actors must be held accountable by governments for the role they play in preventing or perpetuating the weaponisation of technology, including all forms of violence.

Critically examine and provide alternatives to the role and impact of private sector actors in people's digital experiences. This is vital to understanding and challenging how our online experiences are being curated; privacy and the use of personal information; and how we are influenced. More support is needed for initiatives that use technology in positive ways such as to track GBV or gender inequality; or that establish free and autonomous digital networks and communities that seek to foster trust and free expression, or that enable free and open-source software.

Technology companies and other industry actors must situate human security and human rights at the centre of their operations, services, applications, and products—and be held to account. Innovation that is driven by profit-making fails to address human security needs and will entrench inequalities and leave people vulnerable to exploitation or violence. A people-centric, human-rights approach can end the exploitative, gendered labour practices used in the production of the components of technological devices, for example, and must be a consideration as technology reconfigures employment in ways that supplant many of the jobs currently being performed by a larger share of women in many countries.

Support research, improve data collection, and build the evidence base to develop effective policy responses that prioritise gender equality through an intersectional perspective. Information gaps exist on everything from a lack of sex-disaggregated data on internet access, to the constant evolution of online threats on new platforms, to the gender impact of digital-technology driven sectors. Better information and understanding can build awareness of these problems and is central to developing effective policy responses. This includes supporting research on creating programs that empower women, improving sex-disaggregated data collection, and analysing the gendered impacts of digital technology driven sectors.