

5th December 2024

Report on the Seminar Gender Inequality in Digital Spaces: Challenges and Pathways Forward

Panel 1: Digital Spaces and their Role in Amplifying Gender Inequality

Professor David Garcia's keynote addressed how gender biases manifest across major online platforms in various ways. He highlighted Wikipedia as a case study, demonstrating how women are underrepresented in biographies and how the language in these articles often reinforces stereotypes. Women are more frequently described in terms of their relationships or family roles, while men are more often associated with careers and achievements. Turning to social media, Professor Garcia discussed the "Facebook Gender Divide," which measures disparities in access to and usage of the platform. This divide reflects broader offline societal inequalities, as it closely aligns with socioeconomic factors such as economic opportunity, education, health, and political participation. He highlighted evidence showing that increasing women's online access is linked to a reduction in the economic gender gap.

Professor Garcia also examined the unintended consequences of AI moderation on digital platforms. While AI is often deployed to combat hate speech, current models frequently misclassify non-hateful expressions—such as when minority groups share their experiences or reclaim derogatory terms—as harmful. This risks silencing marginalized voices. He emphasized the need for more nuanced and context-aware moderation tools to ensure that efforts to reduce online harm do not inadvertently suppress these perspectives. By addressing these issues, the keynote highlighted the widespread and deep-rooted nature of gender inequalities in digital spaces. It emphasized the importance of creating responsible and inclusive AI to mitigate these issues and promote more equitable online environments.

The panel discussion, moderated by Clémentine Abed Meraim and joined by Professor Mariana Valente and Sofia Kypraiou, delved into the multifaceted nature of gender inequality in digital spaces. A key point began with defining online gender inequality as a systematic asymmetry in how genders are treated, represented, participate, and are given influence online. The discussion also explored the significant offline impacts of online gender-based violence, such as the spread of non-consensual intimate content, which can lead to severe real-life consequences, emphasizing the need to address these issues. Language and bias in digital spaces were highlighted, with the panel emphasizing how more subtle forms of discrimination, such as disparities in how women and men are described, reinforce systemic gaps. Large-scale machine learning and natural language processing tools were identified as potential solutions for uncovering these biases. However, the panel also noted the potential of platforms for empowerment. For instance, online platforms provide opportunities for feminist media, social connections, and employment.

The discussion also considered the role of artificial intelligence, stressing the importance of designing responsible AI tools that promote gender equality. Beyond algorithmic fairness, systems should be developed with human rights and equity as core principles. Research aimed at achieving true inclusivity also requires an intersectional approach that accounts for overlapping discrimination based on race, class, and gender—such as the harm experienced by Black women online, which can differ from that of white women. Additionally, the participants warned that achieving accountability for digital platforms cannot rely solely on self-regulation. Instead, an interdisciplinary effort involving legal, computational, and ethical perspectives is necessary to enforce meaningful change. By addressing these challenges through collaborative, cross-disciplinary solutions, the speakers emphasized the potential to create more equitable and inclusive digital spaces.

Panel 2: Policy Responses and Ethical Considerations in Combating Online Gender-Based Violence

Professor Olga Jurasz presented her keynote speech ‘*Overcoming gaps in law and policy on online violence against women and girls (VAWG): A UK perspective*’. She shared the results of a nationwide survey on the state of online VAWG in the UK, offering critical insights, such as the normalization of this type of violence by young people in the UK. Professor Jurasz also highlighted why rules like the Online Safety Act or the Digital Services Act are a good beginning to address these issues but are by no means the end. She also put significant emphasis on the lack of harmonization in how online VAWG is defined and explained why this is important from a legal perspective. When there is a fragmented picture of the language, laws develop in a very *ad hoc* way, and other harmful activities that are also part of online VAWG are ignored. As a result, we end up with a fragmented legislative framework and a hierarchy of harms, where many things are considered “harmful” but not “illegal.” This leads to very narrow ways of redress for victims.

The panel discussion that followed, moderated by Raquel De Haro and including Prof. Mariana Valente and Dr. Kebene Wodajo, explored the growing trend of criminalizing specific forms of online violence, such as cyberflashing and non-consensual deepfakes. The participants debated whether punitive measures alone are effective or if alternative approaches are needed to ensure meaningful change. Another key issue discussed was the need for a global consensus on defining and regulating online gender-based violence, while recognizing and addressing cultural differences in concepts like intimacy.

The panel also emphasized that true freedom of speech cannot exist in spaces where victims of online VAWG are silenced or absent. Protecting victims' rights is not at odds with free speech, despite claims to the contrary often voiced by certain groups. The discussion concluded with an emphasis on the importance of generating robust evidence on online gender-based violence to inform and develop effective preventive policies.