# Internet for Social Cohesions

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Women and gender diverse people are facing restrictions in accessing information on the Internet and participating meaningfully. To establish healthy and equal societies, youths should urge governments and civil societies to guarantee the rights to freedom of online expression for these communities.
SUMMARY

The inclusion of women and gender diverse people is essential to create better societies. In this summary, we will examine some issues and propose solutions to address from now on. This policy paper is part of the Youth4DigitalSustainability program, from which we came up with this message:

“Women and gender diverse people are facing restrictions in accessing information on the Internet and participating meaningfully. To establish healthy and equal societies, youths should urge governments and civil societies to guarantee the rights to freedom of online expression for these communities.”

CONTEXT

As part of the Working Group on “Internet for Social Cohesion” within the Youth4DigitalSustainability program, we demarked our analysis in two human rights: the Access to Information and Gender Equality. Both rights are part of the States’ commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goals 5 and 16.[1]
1. Access to Information

The right to access to information is established at the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[2] as “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers “.

Similarly, the Yogykarta[3] Principle 36 defines the right to access information for gender diverse people "Everyone is entitled to the same protection of rights online as they are offline. Everyone has the right to access and use information and communication technologies, including the internet, without violence, discrimination or other harm based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics. Secure digital communications, including the use of encryption, anonymity and pseudonymity tools are essential for the full realisation of human rights, in particular the rights to life, bodily and mental integrity, health, privacy, due process, freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association.”

In general terms, the right to access information has been part of the WSIS Declaration of Principles[4], where it comes especially relevant the principle #4 that says “We reaffirm, as an essential foundation of the Information Society, and as outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; that this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organization. It is central to the Information Society. Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers.”
Having access to the Internet allows us to exercise other digital rights, such as the freedom of expression and access to information. However, the digital divide has a consequential impact on two groups of marginalised communities: women and gender diverse persons. According to the annual report launched by the GSMA[5], we came with the conclusion that although there are more women with access to Internet, the digital divide is still very wide and relevant, as shown on the statistics below:

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A mobile internet connection is closing the gender gap.
Women are now 20% less likely than men to use mobile internet.

South Asia has the widest mobile internet gender gap at 51%.

Mobile ownership key barriers for women

1. Affordability
2. Literacy and skills
3. Safety and security
4. Family disapproves

Mobile internet use key barriers for women who are aware of mobile internet

1. Literacy and skills
2. Affordability
3. Safety and security
4. Relevance
5. Security

50% of women and men are using mobile services.

Women are 50% less likely to use a mobile phone.

Among mobile users, women are 8% less likely than men to own a mobile phone.

The mobile internet gender gap is closing.
Women are now 20% less likely than men to use mobile internet.

Awareness of mobile internet is growing quickly for both men and women.

Although it remains unequal.

Consumption of video content on mobile has increased by over 50%.

51% of women now use mobile internet.

However, while we did research on the issue, we realised an apparent problem regarding the lack of statistics on Internet access for gender diverse people, as most of them take into account solely women and girls, leaving outside the analysis of this marginalised community in particular.

Especially this year during the COVID 19 pandemic, the issue of Internet access for women has been more relevant than ever for them to get education, purchase goods, work remotely, do socials and networking, and stay in touch with far-distance relatives.

The graphics show us the gender divide for women in 2020, in low and middle income countries, GSMA Report 2020.
When we speak about gender diverse communities, the access to information on the Internet is essential to having a full development of their personas: one research study [6] explained various aspects of the importance of transgender people to access information regarding their mental health: “These social networks served not only as a resource for information gathering and sharing but also as a safe space for caregivers who wanted to support their child, but were struggling to navigate unfamiliar territory (to access online resources related to transgender health)”.

However, certain social media platforms have censored the content of gender-diverse related videos, photos or posts, which in turn affects their access to information: “In addition to the presence of misinformation about transgender health and identities online, the recently publicized censorship of LGBT-related videos under YouTube’s Restricted Mode raises additional concerns. This YouTube filter, which offers settings to hide explicit content, may be prohibiting some transgender youth and their caregivers from accessing nonexplicit LGBT-affirming content online, which could increase the likelihood that the LGBT-related content they do encounter is not affirming of their or their child’s identity.”[7] This situation is still ongoing, taking into account an example of a lawsuit by YouTube creators which is under discussion this year (2020) at a judicial instance.[8]

To sum up, we quote the example of the debates around filtering and blocking LGBT-related content from Nardis-Hackl[9] on their research: “frequently revolve around government censorship efforts in countries traditionally opposed to LGBT rights. National laws as well as policy and technological design choices of private companies also constrain access to LGBT content and expression in the Western world. Arbitrating access to LGBT content, technical designs like search engine algorithms also mediate values of privacy, reputation and free expression. This increasingly important arbitrating role of the private industry is complicated by the fact that design choices such as Google’s search algorithms are protected trade secrets, obscuring the online mediation of LGBT issues and other human rights issues.”
2. Gender Equality

Women equality has been discussed since the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which originally gave rights to rich men during the French Revolution. From that historical event, women worked towards legally recognising their rights until the Universal Declaration of Rights and Principles. This declaration acknowledged that the rights apply equally to both men and women in 1993 in a Global Conference on Human Rights that took place in Vienna.

However, we can see there are several breaches that prevent women from exercising their rights fully, for example, digital divide and underpaid salaries in comparison to men of the same working positions. When the Internet entered everyone’s lives, the offline inequalities for women are amplified: as we have addressed before, women have less opportunities to own a mobile phone, receive quality education in ICTs and occupy key positions in companies including policy making institutions (‘break the glass ceiling’). Other aspect to highlight is that even though they manage to ‘break the glass ceiling’ and obtain a relevant role in a company/institution, they face other challenges, especially discrimination solely for being a woman; such as facing prejudice of women being bossy and emotional, are only given minor tasks, and are used as an excuse for ‘tokenism’, i.e. forcing in and justifying inclusive policies that only achieve the bare minimum. These derogatory expressions are also present in the online world. With such existing situations in mind, there is an urgent necessity to establish policies and legal frameworks to address them.
Regarding equal rights to gender diverse people, it is essential to remember the Principle 2 of the Yogykarta Principles [10] which establishes “Everyone is entitled to enjoy all human rights without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Everyone is entitled to equality before the law and the equal protection of the law without any such discrimination whether or not the enjoyment of another human right is also affected.” Gender diverse people also face similar obstacles to women when it comes to exercising their rights in an Internet-oriented society, and the potential factors to this problem include the governments’ positions on the presence of expressions and content related to LBGTIQ+ persons; companies/organizations with internal policies that are not LGBT-friendly; and also difficulties in accessing education due to harassment, discrimination, and hate speech.
As defined by UNESCO [11]: “Empowerment is a social and political process that is a natural by-product of access to accurate, fair and unbiased information representing a plurality of opinions. It allows citizens to gain control over their own lives, to work cooperatively and to provide direction to their leaders. The information flows must be on multiple levels and multi-dimensional, in a “multi-logue” with many conversations feeding into the collective consciousness and enriching the active life of the community.”

The empowerment of these communities is a step towards the achievement of more inclusive societies, with more emphasis placed into noting the role of governments and civil societies. We could find some examples below:

Online communities are essential to establishing profound bonds in critical places as a way to find contention and the feeling “to belong”. Both women and gender diverse people access the Internet for many reasons. From an Article 19 research[12], it defines the importance of a free flow of information to achieve gender equality for women and other marginalised communities. The 3 forms of women empowerment stated in the research are extensive to gender diverse people as well:

- On the social level: There is an increased standing in society, based upon shifts in social and cultural norms and traditions.
- On the Economic level: There is an overall increase in economic power and rights, including the right to control and benefit from resources, assets, income and a person’s own time, as well as the ability to manage risk and improve economic status and wellbeing.
- On the Political level: There is an increased participation and leadership in public spheres.

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How can access to information lead to empowerment of these communities? Why are online communities so important to women and gender diverse people?
In addition, it is important to remark another research published at a journal[13], where we found out that the Internet has a positive influence on various minority groups, including sexual minorities. Going into further detail[14], we could extract 3 insights regarding the role of the Internet (and these online communities) in the lives of socially marginalised gender diverse people:

1. On the personal-materialistic level, the Internet is an unprecedented source of information, support and consultation; it allows transgender users to maintain social interactions, take part in the local and global transgender communities and share their experiences with peers — activities that alleviate feelings of isolation (Hegland & Nelson, 2002). The Internet has helped empower them as independent critical subjects, by making similar individuals and rich information available to them (Shapiro, 2004).

2. On the communal level, the Internet reduced organizational and administrative challenges, and thus facilitated transgender political and social activism (Shapiro, 2004). This was a crucial stage in the process of establishing an organized networked transgender community.

3. On the identity level, the cyberspace could be seen as an ideal platform for transgender individuals to express themselves freely, since they are socially obligated to hide their identities in the offline world to avoid social sanctions.

These conclusions could also be extended to (cis gender) women, since the Internet has become a space for women empowerment; women are able to learn different topics and be able to express themselves without taboos, as well as be able to be part of communities where they could combat gender based violence together and be well equipped to protect themselves from cyberbullying, doxxing and hate speech.

In the next section, we will analyse how both aspects of the SDGs are connected to the right of freedom of expression:
We could divide our analysis into the risks and recommendations related to access to information and freedom of expression for these communities:

The risks:

Content Moderation, Censorship and biased algorithms

Content Moderation
As defined by Alyssa Miranda, “Content moderation refers to the processes through which platform executives and their moderators set, maintain and enforce the bounds of ‘appropriate’ content based on many factors, including platform-specific rules, cultural norms or legal obligations”[15] This content moderation has an impact on the way that not heteronormative bodies interact with other users at the social media platforms, which implies that not only do the algorithms incorporate human biases, but also under the presence of human moderators who decide what content is “appropriate for a platform”, such contents could still be tagged as “violatory of the social media platforms”, and therefore they would be erased.
In “The Rule of Law on Instagram”[16] article, the authors pointed out that the content moderation is surrounded by a ‘black box system’, where users could not voice out their thoughts on the content flagged and deemed inappropriate by the platform; they also do not receive further explanation on the reasons as to why the content was tagged as ‘inappropriate’ by the platform. Under this situation, they argue that “transparency requires that the platform’s processes for moderating content and decision-making be as open as possible, with the reasons for moderating content clearly expressed in notice to users. Industry best practice suggests that platforms should publish a regular report that details, inter alia, how much content is removed, who removes content, for what and by what means”[17]

The most complex part is that social media platforms use their own public, yet vague Community Guidelines, but they have another set of guidelines for their moderators to conduct content moderation, in which is confidential. To make matters worse, content moderators are often required to sign non-disclosure agreements to prevent public discussions about the internal decision-making processes and working conditions. Quote:

“There is also a risk that human moderators, both internal and external to Instagram, interpret and/or apply rules inconsistently based on their own value systems, or are guided by their life experience, among other things”[18]

Censorship
Generally the concept of ‘censorship of content’ from women and the LGBT community is linked to authoritarian governments, but limitations to accessing content are also present under democratic governments: Internet censorship and filtering policies “are often justified as protecting cultural and religious ‘values’, that in effect preserve mainstream heteronormative gender and sexual norms, roles and stereotypes.”[19]

In order to move forward to creating more inclusive societies, such values should not be considered as an excuse to restrict rights of marginalised communities. The World Report 2013[20] explains “tradition” is indeed often used to justify discrimination and crackdowns on rights—especially those of women and members of the LGBT community, among others—and is easily hijacked by nations determined to flout the rights of particular groups and to quash broader social, political, and legal freedoms. In such environments, “tradition” subordinates human rights. It should be the other way around (...) Evoking a static and vague concept of “tradition” not only fails to account for these (cultural) shifts, it fossilizes society.”
Biased algorithms
Algorithms play a big role in the social media platforms, in which otherwise it would not be possible to manage due the large amounts of data created every second on the Internet. Moreover, the data is divided into ‘appropriate’ and ‘not appropriate’ by the social media Community Guidelines. These platforms set algorithms to detect content that does not comply with their rules. Crawford[21] explained in a few lines “Algorithms learn by being fed certain images, often chosen by engineers, and the system builds a model of the world based on those images. If a system is trained on photos of people who are overwhelmingly white, it will have a harder time recognizing nonwhite faces.” Biased algorithms also have an impact on non-heteronormative bodies of women and gender diverse people.

Meaningful participation at the Internet Governance (IG) ecosystem
We mentioned in previous sections of our analysis on the different barriers to Internet access (infrastructure, economical, educational) for both women and gender diverse people.

However, we would like to address the matter of participation in the IG ecosystem. Zalnieriute[22] gives a recap on several situations in which women and gender diverse people faced restrictions, most of them are due to the fact that general rules on the Internet are made by white men from North Pole countries: examples of such limitations include death penalties for accessing LGBT-content online; explicit blanket bans of queer expression online, such as the Russian anti-gay propaganda law; covert Internet filtering mechanisms, usage of ‘real name policies’, and ICANN not approving an LGBT community application for the .lgbt and .gay top level domain names; among many others.

The participation in IG related spaces isn’t only focused on online spaces, but also in onsite meetings where annual meetings take place. One case that is relevant to mention is a communique[23] elaborated by a women community after the implementation of an anti-harassment policy in ICANN 59, in which women participants expressed “many times have been constantly faced with harassment, and accordingly we feel uncomfortable being present in the community thus we feel unwelcome practically. Several of us are considering simply being engaged virtually, as physical engagement through presence in the meeting has been faced with verbal harassment and even physical harassment.”
Another interesting document related to women and gender diverse people participation at the IGF is the BPF report 2020,[24] in which has interesting findings: “Overall, all respondents agree that progress has been made at IGF over the years to foster better gender diversity, but more work still needs to be done (especially with regard to gender diverse people).“ Regarding their participation, the report explained it isn’t enough that both women and gender diverse people solely get access to the IGF and participate at the sessions, more should be done: “We need to avoid making people feel like they are being tokenised and are only invited to a session because they represent a certain community and not necessarily because of the value they can bring to a discussion.”

Hate Speech (doxxing, cyberbullying, online harrassment, discrimination)

At a Web Foundations’ article[25] , some concerning statistics showed that women are suffering high rates of gender based violence, which has worsened during the pandemic “52% of young women and girls we surveyed said they’d experienced online abuse, including threatening messages, sexual harassment and the sharing of private images without consent. 87% said they think the problem is getting worse.” [26]

Regarding the barriers of access for LGBT communities, there is an interesting study[27] that showed how LGBT youth suffer from bullying and harassment not only in person but in online spaces as well. “Overall, 70% of LGBT youth said they had been bullied at least once in the past year via at least one mode, including 68% who said they had been bullied or harassed in person, online, or via text message in the past year.”

To summarize, it is crucial to take into consideration that gender based violence towards women and gender diverse people is connected to a patriarchy system, meaning “it interacts and interweaves with layers of power and cultural aspects around age, gender expression, race, sexual orientation, religion, ability, location etc. producing different impacts on different bodies.”[28]
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A basic understanding of how the Internet and Internet governance work is necessary to inform women and gender diverse people that their human rights advocacy in contemporary international law and politics is attainable, because of its power to shape the social and economic relations of our time.

We see how conflicts over women and gender diverse people rights online, just like other types of human rights, have materialized across all functional levels of Internet architecture governance. Most conspicuously, “they help to demonstrate the embedded politics of technical infrastructure and governance. Technical arrangements in areas as diverse as locational metadata or TLD authorizations have a deep implications not only for keeping the Internet operational but also for human rights. This also demonstrates the central role of the private industry in determining how social conflicts and rights play out and are resolved.” [29] This analysis serves as a counterbalance to prevailing narratives about the positive role of the Internet in promoting women and gender diverse people rights.

Particularly in the global context of culturally diverse views about women and gender diverse people, Internet points of control have created powerful tools for repressing the identity expression, association, and communicative liberty of these citizens, be it whether it is private companies suppressing identity choices within their digital platforms, or governments using Internet intermediation points to censor information, track down and/or arrest “dangerous” citizens. “Content-centric examinations of the role of the Internet in advancing rights must also account for the ways in which Internet control points can both expand and repress rights.” [30]

Concerns about the nature of human rights online requires immediate attention to the underlying “systems of administrative coordination and infrastructure that keep the Internet operational.”[31] These points of control lie beneath the more visible layers of content, devices, and applications. As such, there is a great opportunity for scholarly and activist inquiries into women and gender diverse people rights that casts attention to more technologically concealed layers of the Internet, rather than merely content and usage issues.
The advancement of rights requires extending far beneath communication strategies around content and organization into the question of how to create conditions that promote human freedom and expression. Given the place of the private industry in establishing and maintaining much of the infrastructure underlying online expression, Internet companies should routinely assess how decisions over policies and technological designs impact women and gender diverse people rights. Similarly, public policy attention to human rights online will have increasing opportunities to account for the role of Internet governance functions in mediating minority rights and expression. Passing from a model of Content-Centric to one more Human-Centric such that the idea of Internet Freedom could be a possibility for all of us, because when discriminatory online restrictions on women and gender diverse people rights come to light, they are usually justified by manufacturing panics about sexual morality. The threat of the ‘repressive capture’ of the Internet by illiberal states is used to maintain its dominance over Internet policy, content and infrastructure as well, as we can see in the Content moderation on social Media, and recently, due to the pandemic of COVID 19, we also start to notice how AI is replicating those bias. Similarities between these narratives of fear and those employed in other areas of international law and politics are unsurprising, given the socio-technical nature of the Internet. Indeed, “the Internet is not simply a neutral technology, as often mistakenly assumed, but rather reflects domestic and global normative political bargains and continuing geo-political battles for power and resources.” [32]

In the fast-changing and complex reality of the global information economy, the fight for visibility and human rights — both offline and online — for women and gender diverse communities around the globe must continue, and for this to happen, we believe that the solutions must include the following aspects: (1) policies that allow the basic human right of freedom of expression online and offline regarding of sex, gender identity, or gender expression; (2) address these issues at the same time by the technical community, governments, civil society (women and gender diverse people), private sector, academics, all the ecosystem of multistakeholderism of Internet Governance; (3) change policies related to social media such that these platforms could be a safer space for women and gender diverse people, for example, a help desk that aloud to alerts authorities in case help is need it in gender violence situations online and offline; (4) transparency in online content moderation as well as automatic content moderation policies and functionalities on social media and similar platforms; (5) transparency on how data is being collected and their final use; and finally (6) unbiased algorithms that impact women and gender diverse people in order to guarantee their human rights in these online spaces.
References

[1] Note from the authors: Goal 5 originally was shaped for (cis gender) women and girls, however it is important to remark several legislations are understanding it includes gender diverse people to foster the achievement of equality for all. We look forward the SDGs towards the future will incorporate gender diverse people to the improvement of the Action Plan for the SDGs 2030.


The complainants have also compiled some information on a document called “Demonetization report”:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1B5B-877k72PUCNIV3jGonezeNKNeqgFLwULXQ6_evhF34/edit


[10] Idib,Yogyakarta Principles


[17]“The Rule of Law on Instagram..” page 569.


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