

IGF 2022 Best Practice Forum on Gender & Digital Rights
Main Session Report
“Regulatory Practices – A Friend or Foe to Gender and Digital Rights?”
Friday, 2nd December, 10:45 – 12:15 UTC
Room CR2, UNECA
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

1. Line-Up:

Onsite moderation: Marwa Azelmat – Digital Rights Expert, RNW Media

Online moderation: Amrita Choudhury – MAG Facilitator

Speakers:

1. Mariana Valente – Professor, St. Gallen University
2. Julia Haas – Project Associate Officer, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
3. Onica N. Makwakwa – Head of Africa, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership
4. Bia Barbosa – Activist, Coalizão Direitos na Rede
5. Theo Jaekel – Director Business and Human Rights, Ericsson
6. Mahima Kaul – Public Policy APAC, Bumble

2. About the session / key policy questions

On the Internet, both female and LGBTQIA+ communities have found safe spaces to freely express themselves. Similarly, journalists and human rights activists were able to exercise their right to freedom of expression without being targeted as if they were using traditional media. Notwithstanding, censorship based on sex and gender still happen; persecution of dissident voices, likewise. The tool that promotes civic spaces and global outreach is the same that amplifies discrimination. In some countries, legal instruments provide the regulatory base to suppress the rights of marginalized communities in different spheres. Once pushed away from societal life, these marginalized communities are now leaving the online space as a means to protect their privacy and safety.

The session addressed the main subjects of this year's BPF Gender and Digital Rights, concentrated around regulation that challenges (a) Privacy and surveillance; (b) Freedom of expression; and (c) Freedom of association and religion. The key policy question is: what does regulation mean for different stakeholders and for people across different layers of vulnerabilities and identities?

3. Summary of issues discussed

The discussion had the aim of understanding the thin lines between protective, user-oriented regulatory practices and authoritative language with possible restrictions to digital rights. Before the speakers explored the topics, the progress on the 2022 output report was presented by the UN-IGF consultant. As still a work in development, the consultant encouraged the audience to share their thoughts and suggestions to be included in the final version, to be published by late December.

The lively discussion that followed demonstrated that, despite representing different stakeholder groups, the speakers had aligned positions on the protection of gender-diverse communities online. Below is a summary of the issues which were brought up by the podium:

- Regulation is necessary but should be developed in the ‘proper way’, considering local languages and cultures. There are different approaches to ensure gender-diverse communities’ safety online, depending on country/region.
- Notwithstanding, regulation is subjected to those who sit at the negotiating table, those who legislate and make the decisions. Mostly, these power positions are held by men.
- On online violence, women are not only silenced – they are forced into self-censorship because of fear and then abandon the networks.
- Online harms transform and evolve fast, often following the current speed of digital change.
- Additionally, it is difficult to moderate online harms when those executing the task do not speak/understand the language the harm was firstly identified in.
- The speakers have cited that there are given regulations which were enacted as a way to protect women and other marginalised groups, but in fact they do not comply with it – examples of such are listed in the output report, by thematic area.

4. Other initiatives addressing the session issues

Mahima Kaul from Bumble explained the app’s business model of giving more control to women: unwanted contact and images are reduced by the company’s proprietary technology to blur images within the app, allowing users to choose what they would like or not like to see. Users are also able to flag issues immediately. Recently, Bumble has decided to explore the technology with other platforms. Lastly, it has also partnered with therapy providers to ensure appropriate follow-up actions to its users after an incident.

5. Gender remarks

The BPF Gender meetings are traditionally more populated by women, and this reflected in the main session as well. Out of six speakers, one was a man. Both the podium as well as interventions from the floor have claimed for increased active participation from males, as the advancement of gender equality should be pursued with alliances and recognition of places of power and privilege.

6. Session outputs: key takeaways, policy recommendations, suggestions

- Regulation is trailing behind realities on the ground, as it cannot keep up with the fast digital change.
- Online regulation is needed but should be an empowering tool – the problem is not that women and gender-diverse communities do not know what to do, but rather they are unable to implement proposals on their behalf since they are out of places of influence and power.
- There is a need to occupy such spaces and/or find allies in negotiation, legislation, and decision-making.
- Regulation needs to present an evidence-based approach; platforms should make it easier for victims to collect evidence (e.g., chats that disappear or images that can be quickly deleted are problematic).
- Similarly, more attention needs to be paid to regulation enforcement. Words on paper have symbolic importance but are not sufficient. Capacity deficits within current enforcement

agencies and content moderation are real issues and can worsen the chain of online violence.

- Products and technologies should be designed with an outlook on possible risks and human rights infringements (e.g., privacy by design). There is the need to look at biases brought into technology from its inception – if not addressed at the outset, it is very difficult to bring about changes once risky behaviours and product misuse are consolidated.
- Policies and actions should protect women on the internet and not from the internet.
- Making the Internet safer for women ought to make it safer for everyone – freedom cannot be exclusive.