

Gender and Internet Governance in the times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdowns and other measures imposed by states have exacerbated existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political, and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic.¹ Women, girls, and persons of other marginalised genders are affected across every sphere, from health to the economy, security and social protection.² The burdens of added care during the pandemic is placed on women and girls, and there is a sharp increase in domestic violence cases across the world.³

Globally, women are 26% less likely to own a smartphone. These proportions stand at 70% and 34% in South Asia and Africa respectively.⁴ With so much of the information on COVID-19, helplines and health care services, mitigation measures, lockdown protocol and rules in respective locations, and information on personal health care being shared online via national COVID-19 apps, messaging apps, online news media, and social media, lack of access to mobile phones and internet puts women, girls, and persons of marginalised genders at a disadvantage in protecting themselves from the virus.⁵ Trans activists working in rural India say that shops where one can get their phone recharged are closed as they have not been deemed as 'essential services.' Combined with low levels of digital literacy, this means that a significant part of populations living in rural areas cannot use their phones to even make emergency calls.

The lockdown has also amplified inequalities in access to mobile phones and the internet for women, girls, and persons of marginalised genders. Even those who do have access to a mobile phone may not have meaningful access to the internet - either because it is not a smartphone, or because it's a shared phone and their usage is monitored in the family. Women and other marginalised genders often face technology-based violence which has a serious impact on their physical and mental health, and access to information online. With global internet usage increasing by 50%-70% due to lockdowns, quarantine, and shelter-at-place measures,⁶ women and girls are at higher risks for tech-related violence due to the digital gender divide. Sex workers who are now working online and using digital devices fear that their videos and photos will be shared without their consent, of being outed to their families as a sex workers, and of getting cheated out of their payment. As a way to combat the shadow pandemic of violence against women, immediate steps have to be taken by governments, internet intermediaries, and judicial mechanisms to address tech-related gender-based violence in every country.

A larger looming concern among women and LGBTQ communities is that of surveillance and privacy-violation via apps introduced by states to combat COVID_19. There are several privacy

¹ https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf

² <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/shadow-pandemic-how-covid19-crisis-exacerbating-gender-inequality/>

³ <https://in.one.un.org/gender-responsive-governance-in-the-times-of-covid-19/>

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>

⁵ <https://bit.ly/2Zo7bXn>

⁶ <https://bit.ly/2YKIF3J>

concerns associated with these apps as there is no transparency and clear information on the data collected, stored, and removed. This could lead to outing of queer and trans persons, and those who are HIV-infected, and further stigmatisation.⁷

Unless there is due attention paid now to ensure that women, girls, and persons of marginalised gender and sexualities are not left behind in the global fight against an unprecedented pandemic and economic and social crisis, it will be too late, and we will once again have to fight the same fights to regain the same rights which is ours.

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25884&LangID=E>