IGF 2020 Best Practice Forum on Gender and Access
Online meeting IV | 25 June 2020
Summary report

The third online meeting of the IGF 2020 Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Gender and Access focused on discussing issues related to pleasure and consent online. The meeting was attended by 10 participants.

To set the scene, participants were reminded that the BPF is holding two online meetings to look more in depth at the issues explored this year: (1) online violence and harm and (2) online pleasure and consent. These meetings are intended to help clarify how the BPF understands the concepts explored; identify actors/processes focused on these issues; and collect case studies, good practices, and tools for inclusion in the BPF work.

Ms Marwa Azelmat (Association for Progressive Communications (APC)) gave an overview of EROTICS, a two-phase, exploratory research project carried out by APC with the aim to narrow the gap between political assumptions and a better understanding of content and harm based on women's real experience of sexuality online. Phase I of EROTICS (2008–2011) included research in Brazil, Lebanon, India, South Africa, and the USA with marginalised sections of society who use the Internet to exercise their sexual rights, including young women, transgender communities, and lesbian queer activists One of the findings was that there is not much debate on the critical role that an open and free Internet plays in the exercise of sexual rights and sexual citizenship, particularly for marginalised sections of society. Phase II of the project (2012–2014) was focused, among others, on building a network of Internet and sexual rights advocates who are able to share expertise and collaboratively respond to Internet content regulation, and on contributing to the development of Internet governance frameworks that recognise sexual rights and gender equality as key components of a free and open Internet.

Ms Smita Vanniyar (Point of View) noted that too often the conversation on gender issues in the digital space starts and ends at gender violence. While this is an important conversation, it is not the only one to have: we cannot talk about sexuality and consent only through the lenses of violence; the Internet is also about pleasure, and this is something to be talked about and affirmed. Sexuality comes up in political spaces mostly in the context of discussions on issues such as sexual extortion or 'revenge porn'. Everything else – sexual workers, consensual sexual expression, etc – is usually not part of the conversation, because there is a very strong tendency to say that sexual expression online is a wrong thing per se. But this should change; we should approach issues from a consent perspective, and not necessarily a morality perspective.

Gender norms from the offline world are often simply transposed into the online space (e.g. norms that only certain people are allowed to express their sexuality). But if we want an Internet that is equal and where people of all genders and sexualities have a space, the conversation

needs to change. We also need to talk about how women, persons with disabilities, sexual minorities, and other marginalised communities express (or should be allowed to express) their sexuality online. When people say that you should use the Internet for 'right reasons', who defines what is 'right'? Why is using the Internet for expressing one's sexuality not right? It is essential that we bring in an affirmative perspective on pleasure and consent when we talk about the intersection of Internet and gender issues.

It is also important to reflect this conversation into policy discussion and policy making processes. Point of View takes the results of its research into policy spaces such as the Asia-Pacific Regional IGF and the global IGF. But it is not always easy. It was noticed, for instance, that much of the language at the IGF is in the binary, starting with the registration form (which asks whether you are Dr, Mr or Ms) and ending with sessions not paying much attention to gender diversity issues. If we want to bring gender-diverse people into these processes, we need to change these binary policies, and we need to create frameworks that allow people belonging to different identities to participate. Measures could include holding IGF meetings in spaces that are more accessible, allocating funds for people belonging to different identities to participate, integrating gender issues more carefully into the programme planning process (for example, looking for moderators and speakers who are gender-diverse), etc. We also need people in power to acknowledge that things need to change, and a bridge needs to be put in place for people to be able to claim their rights. Some of these issues should be an easy fix and the BPF can take them up with the Secretariat to create a more inclusive space and ensure people do feel welcome.

Something to further look into is the issue of supporting a more active presence of gender diverse people in power position.

Ms Tash Dowell (Zimbabwean chapter of the Coalition of African Lesbians campaign) talked about the process of information movement within autocratic systems, where information does not go to marginalised communities such as sexual minorities. These communities are often not aware of the discussions related to digital rights; for them, the Internet is mostly a space to connect, but not a space where they can share pleasure. And they are also not aware of discussions on policies that (should) tackle issues such as revenge porn or online violence. So the first step is to take the information to these communities, make them aware of digital rights, and make them understand that they should be able to share their sexual information online.

The visibility of sexual minorities online is limited and there is also significant backlash against them. So how do we get sexual minorities to be comfortable enough to share personal information online and to participate in these spaces in a way that does not put them at risk? How do we make them understand that they should be able to advocate for their rights, on and off line? These are questions that need to be looked at more carefully. It is also important to bridge the gap between illegality and freedom of expression: in certain countries, sexual minorities are simply considered 'illegal' despite constitutions granting freedom of expression to all citizens.

When discussing the integration of gender diversity issues and gender rights online in the policy making processes, one issue that is important to look at is that of policy gatekeepers. Are policymakers open enough to allow conversations around sexuality to take place? Are they thinking about the digital space as a space for everyone and a space for information sharing regardless of who is sharing it? More often than not the answer is 'no', which makes the policy spaces themselves limited in terms of what people can talk about and how. The question remains: How do we change this, and how do we ensure that the gatekeepers of policy making are open to these discussions? Even if some NGOs are trying to sensitise them about issues such as gender diversity and the expression of pleasure expression, there is still significant resistance towards inclusion of sexual minorities in policies and in policy making processes.

Another crucial aspect to consider is that of the mental health of people who are faced with backlash after expressing their identities online. Online experiences affect offline experiences, and when people cannot be themselves or cannot express themselves online, this tends to affect their wellbeing seriously.

Next steps

- In the next stages, the BPF will focus on developing its work methodology. Contributions and suggestions in this regard are welcome via the BPF collaborative document.

- BPF meeting V – on **9 July, 13:00 UTC** – will also focus on the methodology.