Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work

Gender-based violence enabled by digital technology: a new occupational hazard?

The use of digital technologies has become an integral part of the professional lives of women and men in various work circumstances. It is therefore logical that common experiences affecting women in the workplace, such as sexual harassment, are increasingly mediated by digital technologies (European Commission, 2019d; European Parliament, 2018a, 2018b).

Online abuse affecting women in their work context is getting increased attention from both researchers and policymakers (Council of Europe, 2016; European Commission, 2019d; European Parliament, 2018a, 2018b). While the magnitude of the phenomenon is unknown, a FRA survey on violence against women asked respondents about their experience of online gender-based violence. While 14 % of women who had experienced such harassment could not identify the perpetrator, 9 % were harassed by someone from their work context (FRA, 2014b).

This subsection will highlight two forms of violence affecting women at work that are enabled by digital technology: online abuse of women public figures and gender-based violence affecting platform workers.

Online abuse against women active in the public sphere

Subsection 9.2.1 highlighted that 9 % of employed women and 11 % of employed men use social media in the context of their work. Increasingly, workers in various industries including the media, politics, the arts and culture, public administration and academia may feel that they must or be required by their employers to maintain a strong online presence. In this context, insults, defamation, threats and hate speech are enabled and facilitated by digital technologies.

While abuse against public figures predates the emergence of digital technologies, the volume of abuse and increased anonymity are strong enabling factors. Such abuse disproportionately affects women, people of colour and members of the LGBTI community, all of whom are attacked for their personal characteristics (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation), while abuse directed at men from the dominant group is more often based on their opinions or status in society (FRA, 2017).

Most of the literature on online abuse against women in professional contexts covers journalists (Edstrom, 2016; European Parliament, 2018b; Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018; Henrichsen et al., 2015; Posetti, 2017; Rego, 2018), political figures and human rights defenders, including feminist activists (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018; Lewis et al., 2017), and academics (Kavanagh and Brown, 2019).

A 2018 study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 45 European countries found that over half of the women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff interviewed (58 %) had experienced sexist attacks on social media, including repeated misogynistic insults and incitement to hatred, nude photomontages and pornographic videos.

This was the leading form of gender-based violence experienced by study respondents but fewer than 10 % of them had reported the incidents. Half of the respondents (47 %) had experienced death or rape threats. In the majority of cases (76 %), the perpetrators were anonymous males (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

In other instances, attacks are orchestrated by peers to humiliate and degrade the professional reputation of women in their fields[1]. Cases include cybermob harassment of female journalists, where users of online forums – mostly young men – are called on to collectively attack a specific individual through digital means (Edstrom, 2016; European Parliament, 2018b; Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018). Such forms of abuse exemplify the potential scale of online harassment, with thousands of insults and threats received in a few hours (FRA, 2016c).

Cyber-violence is used against women in positions of power, especially where they are young or belong to an ethnic or sexual minority, in a bid to delegitimise their power and influence (Lehr and Bechrakis, 2018; Zeid, 2018) and to reaffirm the notion that they do not belong in public spaces (FRA, 2017).

The literature reveals the far-reaching impact of abuse on women's professional and personal lives, with many affected women choosing to opt out of certain social networks despite their usefulness in their profession, to write only anonymously, to avoid disseminating their work and to withdraw from an exposed profession altogether.

Abuse of women online is so rampant that witnessing abuse can affect young women's online behaviour and reduce their likelihood of considering a career in public affairs. After witnessing or experiencing online hate speech or abuse, 51 % of young women and 42 % of young men in the EU hesitated to engage in social media debates, out of fear of experiencing abuse, hate speech or threats. Cyber-harassment from peers and strangers often makes young people, especially girls, less willing to be politically active online (EIGE, 2019a).

Women platform workers placed at risk

Subsection 9.2.3 examined how the emergence of platform work and the gig economy has to some extent shifted the traditional power dynamic between employers and employees (De Stefano, 2016; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2018).

With the employment status of workers in the platform economy shifting towards that of 'independent contractor', for many workers power relations are now between 'service provider' and 'service purchaser' – that is, between platform workers and users/clients – and are mediated by technology (Drahokoupil and Fabo, 2016; Overseas Development Institute, 2019).

The sense of impunity and anonymity given to clients of on-demand platforms has been seen as placing vulnerable workers in a precarious situation, including putting them at risk of gender-based biases, discrimination and abuse (Van Doorn, 2017).

Although there is a lack of quantitative data on the abuse and violence experienced by women platform workers, research has highlighted ways in which women engaged in the platform economy are exposed to a risk of violence from users. This is particularly the case in roles where platform workers interact with users and clients in enclosed spaces with no third party present, such as ride-hailing, home-sharing or personal and household services (Overseas Development Institute, 2016, 2019; Schoenbaum, 2016; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018a).

Women working in these sectors are routinely exposed to the risk of sexual harassment and assault, and the physical and sexual abuse of women platform workers is often facilitated or enabled by certain aspects of platform design and terms of service. For example, rewarding the platform workers with the most detailed profiles encourages them to share a significant amount of private information, such as their name, location, age and photograph, for users to use as selection criteria (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018a).

Some platforms also prevent workers from accessing information that would help them to assess the safety of a gig before accepting it, a strategy referred to as 'information asymmetry'. As described by Van Doorn (2017), platforms '[orchestrate] information asymmetries that skew power relations to the advantage of requesters rather than workers. The provider interface usually offers very minimal information about service requesters and frequently even the most basic information becomes available only after the provider has accepted the request and thus commits to taking on the gig' (Van Doorn, 2017, p. 902).

Similarly, workers are usually prevented from accessing other workers' ratings for particular clients (in the rare cases where clients can be rated), which can limit workers' ability to avoid risky encounters with clients already identified as abusive. Turning down tasks or gigs because of safety concerns can also lead to women platform workers receiving negative ratings, which can reduce pay or lead to suspension (see subsection 9.2.3).

While some platforms have reacted to the safety concerns of female users and service providers by offering possibilities for women-only interactions or through increased outreach to women platform workers (Schoenbaum, 2016), these efforts are considered insufficient.

Accounts from female drivers in ride-hailing contexts highlight that sexual harassment is a systemic issue for women drivers and determines their driving behaviour, including avoiding night-time work and certain areas as a way to minimise risk (Rapier, 2019). They also point to the inaction of platforms in preventing or addressing incidents of gender-based violence (Sainato, 2019).

Digitally enabled violence against women affects women very differently depending on their professional circumstances. Notwithstanding this variation, it is testing the limits of legal instruments on both occupational safety (ILO, 2017) and gender-based violence prevention (Council of Europe, 2011).

Footnotes

[1] Recent examples include secret online groups of French male journalists using social networks such as Twitter to harass fellow journalists, especially women, gay men and men from ethnic minorities, in a bid to compromise their career opportunities (Breeden, 2019).