Internet Governance Forum - 5th meeting
14-17 September 2010, Vilnius (Lithuania)

Interview with Katharine Sarikakis, Council of Europe expert at the IGF

06.09.2010

"The online world extends and reproduces conditions that are hostile to women's rights"

What are the main risks for women´s rights on the Internet?

Some risks are similar to those in the physical world, some heighten problems. The risks derive from the discriminatory representation of women in online media content, stereotyping, the lack of women's political representation in Internet policy making and the lack of women's interests representation in the design of Internet technologies. For example, women may experience gender-specific mental and emotional abuse while online, or even physical abuse facilitated by virtual means. Not only Internet content therefore but also the ways in which women's privacy, data and location can be protected are relevant.

These aspects of mistreatment and discrimination are interconnected: the 'symbolic' level of discrimination - the words, ideas and images - and the material level of disadvantage - violence against women, discrimination at work and pay, objectification and trivialisation - feed into each other. The online world extends and reproduces conditions that are hostile to women's rights. The Internet presents us with new problems as well, but this is not because of the nature of the Internet as 'uncontrollable' and 'dangerous' but because patriarchal cultures frame the way in which communication means and technologies are used.

Is the Internet being used to sexually exploit women?

The Internet is being used to buy and sell women through prostitution, sex slavery and other forms of exploitation; and also for the grooming of young girls by adults. In particular it is being used against women with little access to it, women tied in the chains of poverty, illiteracy or cultural prejudice. Hence, the issue here is not only the fact that women – the poor in particular - are in danger because men can afford and want to buy/sell them, but also the fact that these women have little or no access to the Internet and networks that can support them.

Having said that, access to the world of the Internet alone is not enough, if one cannot shape the conditions of its development and use. These conditions are not experienced only by women in poor countries, but also by women in wealthy nations.

Does the loss of privacy the Internet brings create any risks of facilitating gender violence?

Stalkers, abusive fathers, husbands or boyfriends can trace and find a woman who is on the run or hiding in order to escape an abusive relationship or survive. GPS tracking of mobile phones is only a click away with the help of Internet based operating companies. Women's images, self- made for intimate use or recordings made by partners circulate through mobile phones and PCs without the

possibility for women to eliminate them: the image lives forever. There is a profound imbalance here: on the one hand, hyper-sexualised images of women dominate popular cultural production and consumption coupled; on the other, women are largely deprived from the possibility to technologically intervene in these cultures. The result is the silencing of women, virtually, physically, technologically and politically.

However, it is important to note that states and the corporate world are also part of the problem when they treat women solely as consumers, users or victims. A problem as old as the media themselves is the fact that women have always been kept outside the development of communication policy and technology.

When it comes to policy, whether in terms of law or of corporate direction planning, women's concerns and ideas have been stereotyped and trivialised, categorised as 'special' interests and effectively treated as 'exceptional'. The consequence is that after more than 40 years of feminist movement, we are still compelled to point out women's rights.

Should there be a regulation of content to protect these rights?

Regulation of content is not the only thing we need to do; it is not a panacea. But at the same time we cannot afford not to have it. We must first understand the complexity of the conditions that render women's rights 'exceptional' and at risk.

States and corporations have a big role to play and significant responsibility in drafting not only soft but also hard policy to address sexism and inequality. Content regulation is important, but it should be directed primarily at the producers of harmful content and not at criminalising the user. At the same time, we need regulation that controls technological interference without the users' knowledge from the inside, which means control over those who profit from technological applications that are hidden from the user, do not allow their disabling or are too complicated to understand.

Finally, we need state regulations and corporate policies that take account of women's rights in their structural level through the active participation of women in policymaking. These can be regulations that strengthen the user based initiative and ability to 'fight back', for example by being able to 'delete' private data from social networking sites.

ICANN has decided to create a xxx top level domain. Some actors argued that this step legitimises pornography and others thought that it restricts freedom of expression. What is your opinion?

The decision to create an XXX top level domain alone is less significant than the conditions under which this domain will operate. For me it is important to know this: will there be a significant percentage of the domain's income donated to social work and social groups against child abuse, for setting up porn workers' unions, for programmes against porn addiction and educational programmes? Will the domain filter the content not to allow violence and abusive language? Will the domain facilitate transparency that is so criminally lacking from the porn industry? Who owns whom? What are their profits? What is the status of their workers, and especially women? What are the contracts signed like?