

Special concerns need to be taken to women's and girls' rights to freedom of expression in the new digital media landscape

On March 3rd, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), the Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMAG) and Fojo Media Institute of Linnaeus University ran a side event titled *Gender equality and freedom of expression: Media I Digital platforms* at the 52nd Human Rights Council session at the UN headquarters in Geneva.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Expression and Opinion, Irene Khan, spoke at the event. She underlined the importance of media and digital platforms regulation on different levels to safeguard women's freedom of expression. As the absence of such regulatory frameworks facilitates the continued use of digital platforms as spaces for the exploitation of women – something that negatively impacts on and destroys the mental and physical wellbeing of women and girls worldwide today.

Regulation is fundamental for women's human rights and freedom of expression. No media and digital platform can escape scrutiny of the issue of gender equality. There is a responsibility of State regulation, regulators and media themselves to promote self-regulation.

She stressed the importance of research in this field and acknowledged the relevance of the [Gender and Media regulation study](#), conducted in collaboration between [Fojo Media Institute](#) and the [Department of Media, Journalism and Communication](#), Gothenburg University.

The highlights of the study were presented by researchers Sarah Macharia (WACC, GAMAG) and Joan Barata (Senior Legal Fellow, Future of Free Speech Project, Jusitia: a Danish judicial think tank). Macharia noted that the gender analysis of media regulatory instruments revealed inadequacies that create room for neglect of the principle of gender equality in the right to freedom of expression in and through media. Barata added that women's freedom of expression is hampered by a patriarchal culture in legal instruments, judicial and administrative decisions. He stated that gaps in legislation could be addressed through new laws or applying existing norms to the media. However, he also considered that as certain violations cannot be combatted via prohibitions or reinterpretation of notions such as 'hate speech' and 'discriminatory content', hence, self-regulatory mechanisms must be put established as well.

Aimée Vega Montiel (UNAM, GAMAG) said the active role of the State is needed for the protection of women's human rights in the communication field. She identified pornography, gendered disinformation, discrimination and violence

against women and girls in the media and digital ecosystem as critical areas in the field of regulation. She also stressed the false dichotomy about gender equality against freedom of expression and called for the improvement of co-regulatory models that incorporates a women's human rights approach.

Albana Shala (GAMAG, Free Press Unlimited) said that as media and digital platforms are led by profit, self-regulation itself is not enough: State's law is needed to obligate these corporations to be more accountable. For addressing the impunity that exists now in these sectors, she called for a new gender deal for digital platforms, to improve public values such as accountability.

Meta's Cindy Southworth said that the corporation has invested more than any other platform in safety and security of women. According to her, Meta supports regulation that is built hand in hand with digital corporations, however Meta is working with other companies to develop templates for self-regulation.

As the only session on women's rights during the HRC session, the three international organisations focused the discussion on the need to align the debate about media and digital platforms regulation to the rights to gender equality and to freedom of expression of women and girls.

The discussion points included:

- The extent to which media regulatory frameworks articulate and protect women's right to freedom of expression and opinion
- The limits of media legislation and the alternative measures to secure FoE for all
- Key dimensions on gender equality in media and digital platforms' regulation
- Opportunities and challenges for civil society to intervene in regulation of media and digital platforms
- Regulatory approaches that could help foster collaboration between authorities and platforms

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