Research Paper

Social Media's Role in Enhancing Workplace Gender Equality: A Study on Feminist Values and Social Engagement in the EU and Nigeria

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Abstract
The study that was conducted by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament investigated the influence that social media platforms have on the dissemination of feminist principles and the promotion of gender equality in the workplace. It was discovered that women in the European Union and Nigeria use social media slightly more than men do, with their engagement centred on the maintenance of social ties and good interactions. Social media is more likely to be used by men for the purpose of exchanging opinions and engaging in dangerous behaviours. According to the findings of the study, women and girls are subjected to far higher levels of online harassment and abuse than men. It was proposed that practical and policy recommendations be made in order to strengthen the beneficial influence that social media has on women's rights and gender equality. These proposals included tactics for increasing safety, addressing concerns about privacy, and encouraging a digital environment that is more inclusive.
Keywords: *Social Media, Feminist Values, Gender Equality, Workplace*

I. Background

Commissioned in response to concerns about the digital harms faced by women and girls, this study explored how social media impacts gender equality and workplace dynamics in both the European Union and Nigeria (Ging, 2019; Hall, 2011). Despite the benefits of social media, there has been a rise in attention towards gender-based and sexual digital harm, highlighted by various surveys indicating its alarming prevalence (Hate Aid, 2022; UN Women, 2021). The European Parliament, in its 2018 resolution on gender equality in the media sector, emphasized the negative effects of violent and sexist media content on women's societal participation and the potential psychological and physical damage to youth (European Parliament, 2018). This study critically evaluated the impact of social media on women and girls, utilizing data from EU, Nigerian, national, and international sources (Gordon-Tapiero et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2018). Key issues included sexism and gender stereotypes in online content (Marwick & Caplan, 2018), the effects of pro-anorexia and thinspiration content (Gordon et al., 2021), and various forms of online gender-based abuse (Hinson et al., 2018). The study employed a techno-social perspective, recognizing that the digital world cannot be isolated from broader societal contexts (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021). Analyzing online misogyny helped understand the digital affordances of social media and their relation to existing power structures in gender relations (Ging, 2019; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019).

The primary objective was to assess the impact of social media on women, girls, and gender equality within the workplace and broader civic participation in both the European Union and Nigeria. Using quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study highlighted gendered patterns of social media usage within these regions. It identified areas of inequality in access, self-expression, and the prevalence of gender stereotypes. The study also reviewed the European Parliament's and Commission's positions, existing legislation, and actions at various levels aimed at protecting women from social media's negative impacts. Finally, it offered practical and policy recommendations for decision-makers to improve the positive impact of social media on women and girls.

II.   Conceptual Framework

Various academic disciplines addressed social media research differently, which informed our study. Cyber-psychology studied individuals to determine what drives them to engage in various online behaviours (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Technological-determinist methods emphasised technology above socio-economic and cultural issues (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Internet, media, and gender studies often used a sociological method to examine how individual behaviours and usage affected society, technology, culture, and economics (Noble, 2018).Social media effect analysis required both offline and online environments as co-constitutive (Turkle, 2011). Lived experiences shaped internet behaviour and affected emotional and financial well-being (Hogan, 2015). Girls receiving unsolicited Snapchat messages or photographs from boys in their school experienced these situations on social media and in school and classrooms (Tufekci, 2017). If harassment campaigns kept women offline, they may have lost their jobs (Jane, 2017). Thus, social media were part of 'real life' as well as affecting it. Thus, problems in the digital world have to be addressed in their social, political, technological, legal, and economic settings (Ging, 2019).This study used online misogyny to identify the causes of harm to women and girls (Jane, 2017).

This conceptualisation explained the breadth of interconnected hazards and impediments women and girls faced on social media and their wider implications for individual women and society's involvement and wellbeing (Hinson et al., 2018). Online misogyny may or may not have involved violence, but it almost always caused direct psychological, professional, reputational, or physical harm or indirectly made the internet less equal, safe, or inclusive for women and girls(Marwick &Caplan,2018).

2.1 Differences in How Men and Women Use Social Media

This section examines gender differences in both the use of social media and the content seen by users, whether influenced through targeted advertisements or the algorithmic decision-making of platforms.

2.1.1 Gender Differences in Population Use of Social Media

In the early days of the internet, online culture was dominated by men. This reflected the limited access to the internet and computers, with those most likely to engage online being primarily male scientists, mathematicians, and technologically sophisticated computer hackers. Over time, this gender disparity in internet use has lessened. Today, women are slightly more likely than men to use the internet for social networking across the EU (Table 1). Younger generations, irrespective of gender, use social networking sites at much higher rates, heightening the potential impacts of gender bias or engender harm on young people.

Table 1: Percentage of Women and Men Participating in Social Networks (Creating User Profile, Posting Messages or Other Contributions to Facebook, Twitter, etc.) in the EU

	Male 16-24	Female 16-24	Male 25-54	Female 25-54	Male 55-74	Female 55-74
European Union	82.86	86.28	64.93	70.47	31.91	33.8
Austria	90.96	95.79	68.34	76.19	31.26	31.68
Belgium	81.86	89.23	73.72	79.25	46.72	44.73
Bulgaria	89.21	88.95	75.37	77.22	32.35	37.01
Croatia	89.57	98.91	66.78	82.97	30.14	27.49
Cyprus	96.89	96.03	86.39	88.2	48.06	51.71
Czechia	96.99	95.58	75.43	81.99	25.62	29.8
Denmark	97.24	98.47	86.09	93.76	66.14	74.79
Estonia	89.43	95.51	72.4	84.41	28.47	41.32
Finland	88.03	97.56	81.3	91.48	44.85	61.22
France	73.12	73.36	47.07	55.2	21.02	23.58
Germany	74.34	78.92	56.95	58.94	23.84	23.22
Greece	93.66	92.95	74.82	78.6	32.25	33.72
Hungary	96.93	97.09	84.62	92.61	49.72	56.74
Italy	77.59	84.1	60.51	64.39	31.34	29.62
Latvia	93.34	95.88	77.59	88.9	35.57	52.02
Lithuania	95.03	88.29	74.46	85.14	32.8	44.99
Luxembourg	78.69	74.95	66.54	67.98	42.3	42.56
Malta	92.57	98.65	82.81	89.65	43.57	50.2
Netherlands	91.32	89.18	77.77	83.48	55.9	57.54
Poland	89.72	96.96	68.86	76.1	27.63	29.58
Portugal	93.9	97.24	77.64	79.38	34.74	40.62
Romania	88.08	86.1	76.65	78.34	43.12	46.39
Slovakia	78.85	81.68	67.03	67.77	31.95	31.19
Slovenia	84.08	97.23	72.89	80.77	30.46	36.49
Spain	91.28	94	67.24	74.85	36.85	39.7
Sweden	71.58					

Source: Eurostat (2021)

The EU Kids Online 2020 survey, which surveyed children ages 9-16 across 19 EU countries, finds a similar pattern, with girls on average 6 percentage points more likely to visit a social networking site at least once a day in comparison to boys (Figure 1).

2.1.2 Platform Usage Differences Between Men and Women
Reliable data on the gender usage of various social media platforms is difficult to obtain. The Reuters Digital News Report 2022 surveyed over 40,000 adults in 22 EU Member States using a representative sample to gain information about their news consumption habits. Of the 40,000 surveyed, 52% were women and 48% were men. While the survey does not focus on social media, it did ask respondents which social media platforms they use. Figure 2 shows the gender breakdown of reported use for each social media platform.
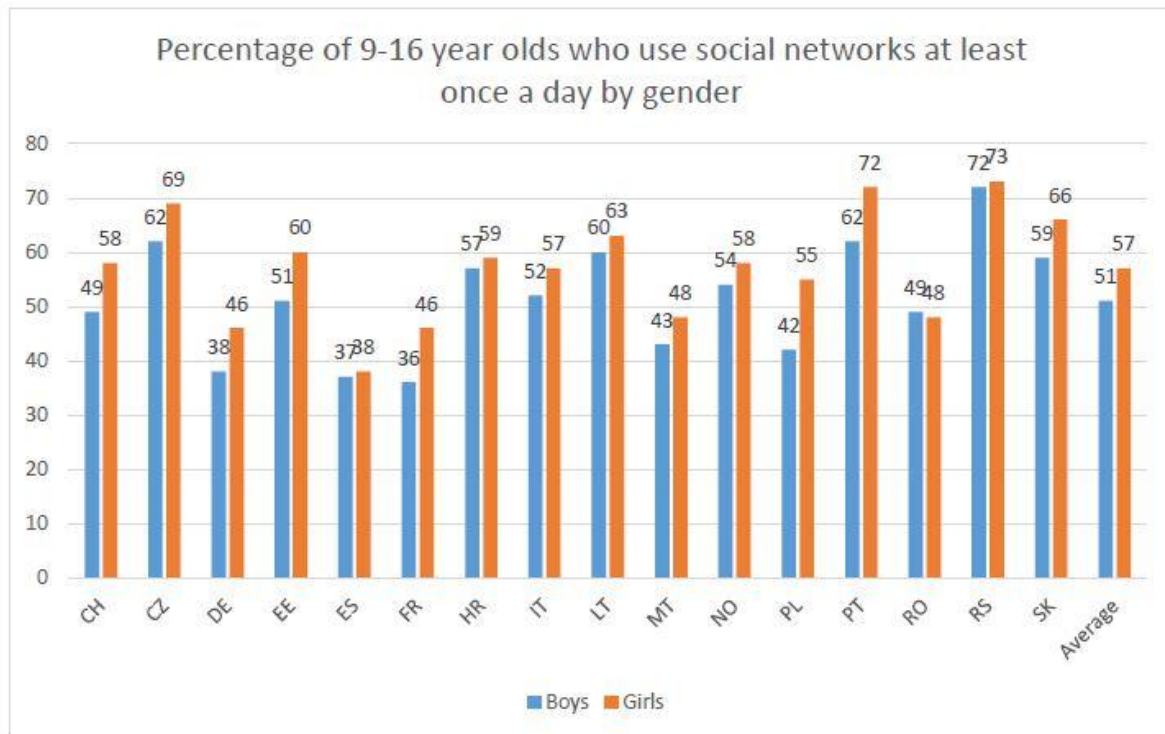

Figure 1: Percentage of Boys and Girls Who Visit a Social Networking Site at Least Once a Day Across the EU

2.1.3 Gender Differences in Types of Usage
Significant differences exist between men and women regarding their social media usage, influenced by gender-normative social roles, gendered peer-group cultures, and the types of content, features, and communicative styles afforded by different platforms. This section examines how social roles shape stereotypes, which in turn impact behavior, and how challenging these social roles can change gender differences, using online gaming as an example. It also explores various gender differences in social media usage.

At a societal level, these roles often reflect the division of labor that favors women as homemakers and primary caregivers, thereby reinforcing the stereotype that women are more suited for care work. The development of social roles also begins at an early age; toys marketed to girls encourage domesticity and a focus on appearance, while those targeted at boys promote action, competition, physicality, and aggression . This interplay of social roles and stereotypes helps explain many of the gender-based differences noted on social media.

Research commissioned by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe finds that 48% of those who play video games in Europe are women and girls, similar to figures from the US . However, the social role of 'gamer' online is typically perceived as male. Paaßen et al. investigated this incongruence and found that because men more visibly identify and perform the identity of 'gamer', there is an expectation that women are not or cannot be gamers. This has resulted in a gaming culture that can often be hostile to women, leading to fewer women gaming in online, social spaces .

The EU Kids Online 2020 survey identified gendered differences in types of online usage:
- Boys are 5 percentage points more likely to watch videos online (69% vs. 62% average).
- Boys are 30 percentage points more likely to play online games (59% vs. 29% average).

- Girls were 19 percentage points more likely to feel upset after being mistreated online (89% vs. 70% average).
- Boys were 8 percentage points more likely to report seeing sexual images online (37% vs. 29% average), and girls were 25 percentage points more likely to feel upset by seeing sexual images (51% vs. 26% average), suggesting boys seek out such content more.
- Boys are 6 percentage points more likely to find it easier to be themselves online (64% vs. 58% average).
- Boys are 6 percentage points more likely to ignore parental guidance on internet use (49% vs. 42% average).
- Boys are 9 percentage points more likely to feel safe online (70% vs. 61% average).

These findings suggest that boys are more confident online, take risks, and are more robust to negative acts than girls, who are more cautious but feel less safe (Houghton et al., 2020). A recent poll of 8,000 16-19-year-olds in the UK, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Romania, Sweden, and Norway indicated that boys took more online risks. Boys (73.6%) were more likely than girls (64.6%) to engage in 20 dangerous or harmful behaviours such sexting, distributing violent content, online harassment, hacking, and cyber fraud (European Commission, 2021). Only 'monitoring what someone else was doing online without their knowing' was more common among girls (Livingstone et al., 2017).Different sorts of internet addiction affect men and women. A meta-analysis of 82,440 adolescents and adults indicated that men are more likely to become addicted to online gaming and women to social media, with a larger effect size in Europe (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The prevalence of addiction disorders is minimal, but gender disparities in consumption patterns suggest that men and women prefer different types of use (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2016).The motivations and causes for gendered online behaviours have been studied more deeply in smaller research than in larger ones. While both men and women use social media to communicate, a US study indicated that women value strong social ties and are more aware of privacy hazards when sharing information (Hampton et al., 2011). Norwegian social media users demonstrate that women snap more selfies and employ image filters (Hargittai, 2018). In another EU-based study, women were more inclined than males to evaluate social media information, particularly images and videos, when planning activities and trips (Rasmussen et al., 2019).Online and offline experiences influence behaviour and usage. Men post more online and offer their ideas (Smith et al., 2018). Research on linguistic differences among teens on social media found that boys are more assertive and girls focus more on pleasing social interactions appealing to boys, suggesting that this behaviour is rooted in socialisation (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Girls' and women's experiences of online harassment and abuse have a significant 'chilling effect', making them more cautious about what and how they express their opinions (Jane, 2017).

2.2 Differences in Exposure to Content Between Men and Women

This section discusses the practical challenges of collecting content exposure data, gender targeting in social media advertising, and the need for increased transparency and access to social media data for efficient research (Gorwa, 2019). According to Binns et al. (2018), these data are difficult to access, leaving considerable knowledge gaps in this subject. Social media platforms' operational opacity is one reason the Digital Services Act addresses researcher data access and algorithmic transparency. This opacity makes it difficult to adequately assess the possible consequences and downsides of these platforms, especially content delivery algorithms (European Commission, 2022). Due to practical constraints, Duggan et al. (2015) found it difficult and under-researched to study gender discrepancies in social media content. This research is impossible for two reasons. First, unlike mass media, where an audience is routinely presented with the same content from a producer, social media users are both the audience and the content creators (Marwick, 2013). Social media networks distribute material through user selection and algorithmic recommendations. Users can select to read content from other users by following or friending them, according to Zuboff (2019).

Additionally, algorithms distribute material based on user choice and projected interest. According to Binns et al. (2018), a user's Twitter feed includes content from people they follow, content they engage with, and content the algorithm finds interesting.Algorithms may use gender, age, and user interactions to customise content (Gorwa, 2019). Figure2 shows EU social media users by gender. Binns et al. (2018) found that when a user "likes" a video, they are given related videos that are popular with other users who liked it. This algorithmic profiling can lead to stereotyping, when the platform assumes a user's gender based on their conduct and delivers gender-appropriate material (Gorwa, 2019).This method's complexity and lack of openness make it hard to assess how much these systems contribute to online gender bias or harm (Zuboff,2019).

Another obstacle to research is the lack of platform data and information (Gorwa, 2019). Binns et al. (2018) found it difficult to retrieve social media information for research, and user data is often unavailable. Platforms do not publish their content algorithms, making it impossible to determine why a user is shown a piece of content (Gorwa, 2019). This lack of transparency makes it harder to monitor the media to evaluate

gendered representations and investigate how personal attributes affect material availability (Zuboff, 2019). Exceptions include smaller experiments using supplied user data or false accounts. The lack of data makes it harder to understand social media'sconsequences, which may include misinformation, manipulation, and gender inequity (Binns et al., 2018).One study (Gorwa, 2019) found that only platforms understand personalization processes, making it difficult to mitigate their harmful effects.

III.   INDIVIDUAL IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

This chapter presents key research about the known impacts of social media on individual women and girls. Much of the research cited refers to systematic reviews or influential studies that identify the mechanisms by which these impacts occur. Although these studies may not focus exclusively on Europe, they are nonetheless critical for understanding this issue.

3.1. General Mental Health

Even without gender, linking social media use to mental health issues like sadness and anxiety is difficult (Primack et al., 2017). Since mental health difficulties and social media use rise with adolescence, many study focusses on them (Vannucci et al., 2017). This raises questions about a causal link (Kelly et al., 2018). While not especially focused on Europe, this research examines the association between social media and mental health issues and what may explain it (Twenge &Martin, 2020).Kelly et al. (2018) analysed 10,000 14-year-olds from the UK Millennium Cohort Study to determine how social media affects depression and its pathways. Key findings:

➢ Girls had a substantially higher effect on depressed symptoms than boys due to more social media use. Girls and boys who spent more than 3 hours but less than 5 hours on social media had 26% and 21% higher rates of depression, respectively, compared to those who spent less than 3 hours. These percentages jump to 50% for girls and 35% for boys after 5 hours (Kelly et al., 2018).

➢ Lack of quality sleep from social media use was the biggest risk factor for depression. Low self-esteem, negative body image, and online abuse were also linked to depression. Online abuse affected other routes, causing poor sleep, low self-esteem, and negative body image (Kelly et al., 2018).

Active use involves posting, interacting with content, or interacting with people through comments or direct messaging, while passive use involves viewing content from others without interacting with it (Verduyn et al., 2015). Active use improves well-being, while passive use decreases it (Verduyn et al., 2015). Passive use encourages comparisons, which increases feelings of isolation and inadequacy, while active use increases social capital and connection (Verduyn et al., 2015). This highlights the fact that social media's effects on well-being depend on why people use it (Vannucci et al., 2017). Few adolescents who passively use social media experience negative impacts, while some are more vulnerable to harm online (Primack et al., 2017). A young person who is dissatisfied with their body may passively browse posts that reinforce these feelings, while another young person may not view the same posts through the same lens of negative social comparisons (Verduyn et al., 2015). Social media can contribute to unhappiness, although it is rarely the main issue (Vannucci et al., 2017).

3.2. Body-related Mental Health

Research has consistently indicated a connection between issues relating to body image, eating disorders, and social media (Perloff, 2014). A systematic review of 67 papers concluded that there is ample evidence to support the claim that internet usage, particularly on image-based social media platforms, is associated with increased body image and eating concerns, and that adolescents appear to be particularly vulnerable to these effects (Fardouly et al., 2015). Another systematic review covering both adolescents and adults found that social media use, and in particular photo sharing, is associated with disordered eating outcomes and negative body image, with appearance-based social comparison identified as a key factor in this process (Pantic et al., 2012). Instagram use has been identified as a factor for depression, low self-esteem, appearance anxiety, and body dissatisfaction among women, particularly when exposed to beauty and fitness images (Perloff, 2014). Women who shared selfies on social media were more likely to report a worsened mood and feeling unattractive, and a 'drive for thinness' was identified among women who regularly view appearance-focused posts shared by models and fitness bloggers on Instagram (Fardouly et al., 2015).

A key explanation for why women are more drawn to image-based social media platforms, despite their propensity to induce body dissatisfaction, is objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). According to objectification theory, growing up in a society where women's bodies are routinely sexualized and used as a gauge of their value by others causes women to become more self-conscious of how they present themselves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This in turn leads to body surveillance, which is the habitual monitoring of one's appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Furthermore, life-course changes, such as puberty, are associated with higher mental health risks, such as eating disorders, because girls experiencing puberty become more aware that they will be sexualized, leading to increased self-objectification (Perloff, 2014). Girls are more at risk of

experiencing body dissatisfaction because of three factors, which have been described as a 'perfect storm' (Fardouly et al., 2015):
1.   Social media features: Images of peers and the ability to elicit feedback.
2.   Adolescence features: Heightened importance of peer relationships and approval.
3.   Gender socialization features: A societal focus on appearances for women and girls.

Teenage traits are mostly fixed. Social media features like sharing images are not practical to challenge, but more subtle features like how a platform shares metrics about how other users have engaged with an individual's content may be (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). Chapter 5 discusses challenginggender socialisation (EU Kids Online, 2020).

Feltman and Szymanski (2018) analysed women's Instagram use and discovered characteristics that either cause or prevent body surveillance, or self-focus. Body monitoring was more common in people who internalised societal beauty norms or compared themselves to better-looking people. Strong feminist ideas, defined as agreement with attitudes and beliefs that advance gender equality, protected these women from body monitoring despite Instagram use (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). These findings again show that photo-based media does not cause body image concerns. Instagram has spread pro-anorexia imagery, but it may also reveal the sorts and reasons of gendered distress experienced by many girls and young women (Fardouly et al., 2015).

3.3. Relationships
The importance of social relationships for adolescent girls may lead to the internalization of the 'sociocultural rules' of social media. Girls often feel that they need to engage in a certain way or project the 'right' type of image, which can lead to additional stress (Vannucci et al., 2017). Girls frequently use social media to present themselves and to gain approval or validation from others. If their posts do not receive the desired level of engagement, it can lead to feelings of rejection or inadequacy (Kelly et al., 2018). For instance, studies have found that the number of 'likes' a post receives can have a significant impact on an individual's self-esteem (Verduyn et al., 2015). This form of validation seeking is linked to increased levels of anxiety and depression among girls (Primack et al., 2017).
Social media can also impact the quality of girls' relationships. For example, girls are more likely than boys to experience negative interactions or cyberbullying (EU Kids Online, 2020). They may also engage in 'drama' or relational aggression, which can involve exclusion, gossip, and manipulation (Vannucci et al., 2017). These behaviors can have a detrimental effect on their mental health and well-being (Kelly et al., 2018). Additionally, girls may experience pressure to maintain a certain level of popularity or to conform to certain social norms, which can lead to increased stress and anxiety (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018).

3.4. Self-Expression and Identity Formation
Social media can also play a significant role in the process of self-expression and identity formation for adolescent girls. It provides a platform for them to explore different aspects of their identity, to express themselves creatively, and to connect with others who share similar interests or experiences (Perloff, 2014). This can be particularly important for girls who may feel marginalized or who are struggling with issues related to their gender, sexuality, or cultural background (Fardouly et al., 2015).
However, the process of self-expression and identity formation on social media can also be fraught with challenges. Girls may feel pressure to conform to certain ideals or to present themselves in a way that is perceived as acceptable or desirable by others (Verduyn et al., 2015). This can lead to feelings of inadequacy or self-doubt if they do not receive the expected level of validation or approval (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). Additionally, the curated nature of social media can create unrealistic expectations and contribute to a distorted sense of self (Vannucci et al., 2017).

IV.   Societal Impacts of Social Media on Women and Girls
While it is challenging to identify and quantify these impacts due to the complex interplay of social media with offline factors, research indicates that social media significantly shapes and reflects public opinion (EU Kids Online, 2020). This chapter explores how social media facilitate and reinforce perception biases related to gender stereotypes, normative beauty standards, sexual consent, and women's sexual autonomy. It addresses gender norms, civic participation, cultural stereotyping, and the influence of the manosphere and pornography on women and girls (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018).

4.1 Reinforcement of Gendered Norms
While Section 3.2 discussed social media's impact on body-related mental health, this section extends to broader social expectations about women's appearance and behavior. The visual nature of social media

exposes young people to numerous images of women's bodies, many edited to accentuate certain features and hide imperfections (Perloff, 2014). This phenomenon contributes to a 'pedagogy of defect' where young women scrutinize themselves and engage in 'nano-surveillance,' feeling insecure about their physical features like pore size and thigh circumference (Fardouly et al., 2015). These pressures are linked to targeted advertisements promoting cosmetic surgeries, supplements, and 'clean living' (Verduyn et al., 2015).

Terms like 'Snapchat Dysmorphia' and 'Selfie Dysmorphia' highlight the dissonance young women feel between their filtered and unfiltered appearances (Primack et al., 2017). The EU Kids Online survey suggests this process starts young, with girls more likely to see content promoting thinness, though exposure levels are low for both genders (EU Kids Online, 2020). Social media, intended for self-expression and identity experimentation, often replicate and amplify offline gender norms (Kelly et al., 2018). Studies show women on social media present themselves as dependent and attractive, while men emphasize independence and activity (Vannucci et al., 2017). Positive feedback on gender-stereotypical displays in selfies further reinforces these norms (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018).

4.2 Impact of Harassment on Professional and Civic Participation

Online misogynistic abuse affects personal, political, and professional spheres, often lasting beyond the online interaction (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). Amnesty International reports that online abuse silences young women, influencing 76% of respondents' social media use and causing 32% to stop posting (EU Kids Online, 2020). Concerns for privacy, safety, and family lead to self-censorship and avoidance of certain discussions (Kelly et al., 2018).

Harassment in politics discourages women's participation. Highly visible female politicians receive more uncivil comments, as seen in the 2016 US Presidential elections, where online misogyny deterred women's political engagement (Fardouly et al., 2015). Women are less outspoken about politics on social media, with Twitter experiencing higher rates of 'mansplaining,' discouraging political discussions (Primack et al., 2017). Female journalists face targeted harassment, with significant impacts on public discourse and workplace environments. Studies show disproportionate targeting of female journalists, particularly those visible in the news (Vannucci et al., 2017).

4.3 Cultural Stereotyping and Participation

Platform affordances create diverse communicative cultures, which users adopt and change gender-specifically (Fardouly et al., 2015). For instance, Koc-Michalska et al. observed that women use Twitter less than men. This may be because Twitter networks are mostly weak-tie, while Facebook networks are stronger (EU Kids Online, 2020). Twitter is more open and involves nameless strangers. Facebook interactions are mostly between friends and family, preventing bad behaviour, while privacy settings protect communication (Primack et al., 2017). Twitter exacerbates the gender difference since women are less likely to fight than men, although Facebook does not (Kelly et al., 2018).

YouTube and TikTok viewers have quite distinct experiences due to recommender algorithms that propose content based on age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and previous activity (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). Recent Reset Australia experiment created phoney profiles under young male identities and compared extremist and mainstream material recommendations. All accounts received manosphere and anti-feminist content recommendations, demonstrating that the algorithms targeted men regardless of usage trends (EU Kids Online, 2020). Platform usage may be gender-balanced, but content consumption and interaction styles vary greatly (Fardouly et al., 2015). Assessing gender equality in social media access and visibility is difficult. Nilizadeh et al. investigated over 94,000 Twitter users to determine the relationship between perceived gender and online visibility indicators such followers, list assignments, and retweets. An overall weak disadvantage towards perceived female users and a 'glass-ceiling' impact, analogous to difficulties women encounter in achieving higher positions in enterprises, were found (Vannucci et al., 2017). Image search engine and Wikipedia studies show gender prejudices and discrepancies between

V.   Conclusion

This research underscores the significant challenges faced by women and girls on social media, highlighting issues such as online misogyny, psychological impacts, and limitations on participation. The findings indicate that social media use is associated with increased depressive symptoms, particularly in girls, due to harassment and negative body image. Additionally, gender stereotypes and targeted advertising contribute to negative experiences online. Despite these challenges, social media can also serve as a powerful tool for addressing gender inequality through campaigns like **#MeToo**.The EU's Policy and Strategies, particularly the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the updated European Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids (2022), emphasize the importance of eliminating gender inequalities and addressing gender-based violence, including online violence. These strategies call for better data collection, implementation of relevant

EU laws, and ensuring safe digital experiences for children, including tackling online harms and gendered violence.

To address these issues, several recommendations are proposed:

Regulation:

1. Complete EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention and adopt related directives to strengthen the legal framework against gender-based violence.

2. Review the Digital Services Act (DSA) for its effectiveness in addressing gendered harms and ensure it includes measures to tackle these issues comprehensively.

3. Address exemptions for small platforms under the DSA to ensure uniform standards across all platforms.

4. Restrict gender-based targeted advertising within the DSA to prevent reinforcement of harmful stereotypes.

Platforms:

5. Implement stricter content moderation and sanctions for gender-based abuse to create a safer online environment.

6. Provide transparent details on policy, algorithmic design, and advertising data to support research and ensure accountability.

7. Incentivize platforms to collaborate with researchers on improving safety and reducing gender-based violence.

8. Develop guidelines for ethical gender targeting in advertising to promote fairness and equity.

Challenging Online Misogyny:

9. Develop campaigns to help users identify and understand gender-based violence, promoting awareness and prevention.

10. Promote social media literacy, especially about unhealthy norms and image manipulation, to empower users with knowledge and critical thinking skills.

11. Encourage innovation in tackling gender norms and reducing online harm through technological and social solutions.

12. Review and update educational curricula to include social media literacy, digital consent, and ethics, preparing the next generation for responsible digital citizenship.

Key Takeaways

• Policy and Regulation: There is a strong push for policy updates and enforcement to address online gender-based violence. The DSA and ratification of the Istanbul Convention are critical steps in this direction.

• Platform Responsibility: Social media platforms are urged to enhance moderation, transparency, and collaboration with researchers to tackle gender-based harm.

• Educational and Social Innovation: Efforts should include educational reforms and innovative solutions to promote digital citizenship and challenge harmful gender norms.

These measures aim to create a safer and more equitable online environment for women and girls, addressing both systemic issues and individual experiences of online harm.

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