

Session 5 Artificial Intelligence, the Digital Frontier and Women's Rights

Introductory remarks

Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant concept that may one day impact on our lives or those of our children. It is here and its impact is being felt. While it provides opportunities for previously inconceivable human progress and an unprecedented tool for dismantling exclusion and discrimination, it also creates real risks of creating new barriers, new areas of exclusion and new rights violations.

The intersection between AI, expanding access to new digital frontiers, and women's rights is not just about technology. It is about power, access, and whose voices shape the future. It is a terrain in which the rights of all human beings, but particularly those of women, are being actively redefined. We cannot ignore it.

I hardly need to remind you that few women are architects of AI systems around the world; and, as users of digital technology, the access of women around the world is deeply uneven. Women, particularly in developing regions, are less likely to have internet access or digital literacy which limits participation in the digital economy, in education, and in spaces where AI is built and used.

Online digital technology and AI are not neutral spaces. AI models are trained on vast datasets that reflect historical prejudices. They mirror the disparities and challenges that exist in society and continue to reflect patterns of historical inequality. While the expansion of digital frontiers and AI has the ability to extend existing opportunities and build new ones, including in our access to information, education, work, health, financial services, and in the way that we work, increased automation often disproportionately risks negative effects and harm to those most vulnerable in our societies. AI and digital technologies have opened new forms of harm, amplifying harassment, abuse and stalking, exponentially extending the negative impact of sophisticated deepfakes and automated bot networks which can be weaponised, especially against women, particularly those in public life. This has made online spaces increasingly hostile for women, which risks creating a chilling effect, pushing women out of them, limiting their engagement with and access to such spaces. This also risks serious and negative impacts on freedom of expression.

Without appropriate intervention and regulation, AI threatens to increase the scale of these biases globally and rapidly. Governance of AI is urgently needed to ensure that these tools are transparent, subject to appropriate audit and shaped by inclusive policy. Digital laws must consider how to hold transnational tech companies accountable for the harms proliferating on their systems. Judges also need to treat online violence with the same legal gravity as we treat physical violence in our courts. Without this, unequal access and marginalisation will remain, with women being excluded from shaping the technologies that affect their lives. This only reinforces the glass ceiling.

Digital rights must be treated as human rights. It is essential that law and policy regulating access to AI and the digital world reflect gender-sensitive approaches in addressing issues such as data privacy, consent, algorithmic transparency, the safety of women and children. Without this, existing legal frameworks will lag behind

technological change, leaving gaps in protection. Women's rights must be embedded into the expansion and regulation of digital systems and AI, or risk being left behind. This requires deliberate choices to be made as to who builds the systems, who accesses the systems and how we regulate them.

We are honoured to have three speakers today who will discuss these important issues. The first of whom is the President of the Constitutional Council of our dear neighbour, Mozambique, President Lucia da Cruz Ribeiro.