Online gender-based violence as a socio-technical issue: the aware gaze of activists and practitioners

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Abstract

This article addresses online gender-based violence as a complex interaction between misogynistic socio-cultural repertoires and the political economy of digital platforms, focusing on the perspective of Italian activists and practitioners who work to counteract gender-based violence. We investigate their understanding of platform infrastructures and affordances, drawing upon research on gender and digital technologies, along with recent studies on user awareness. Based on about twenty interviews, our analysis reveals that interviewees, albeit recognizing the inclusive potential of digital media, are acutely aware of how certain platform affordances and operational mechanisms can perpetuate gender-based violence online. Their "factual" awareness, rooted in the practices of struggle and/or work that they carry out on a daily basis,

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unexpectedly prompts them to advocate for "old-fashioned" solutions to make digital environments safer and more inclusive.

Keywords: online gender-based violence, digital activism, user awareness, platform political economy, technological affordances.

Introduction

Online gender-based violence (OGBV) is a pervasive, multifaceted phenomenon, reflecting deep-seated gender inequalities in a rapidly evolving socio-technical context. Across Europe, OGBV has emerged as a critical concern, blending traditional forms of violence with new digital dimensions that could mirror and amplify harm through and/or enabled by technology. This form of violence predominantly targets women, girls, LGBTQIA+ individuals and other marginalized communities, exploiting digital platforms' technical features and societal pervasiveness to perpetuate abusive behaviors.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) highlights that approximately 20-25% of women in the EU have experienced some form of online abuse, with non-consensual intimate image sharing, sextortion, and targeted hate speech as prevalent forms (EIGE, 2023). High-profile victims, including female politicians, journalists, and activists, face disproportionate threats aimed at silencing their voices, with online abuse occurring three times more frequently than for their male counterparts (EWL, 2022). The phenomenon is intersectional in that it heightens risks for women with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ and racialized individuals, and young girls (EIGE, 2022). Moreover, it is widening its scope, in that it is finding its way also in emerging digital environments such as the Metaverse, the Internet of Things (IoT), spyware and AI-generated deep-fakes (Ibidem).

Italy reflects many of the broader European trends, but also displays unique characteristics. For instance, 68% of Italian women face online harassment, with cyberstalking linked to intimate relationships affecting 12% of them (ISTAT, 2020). The overlap between online and offline abuse is striking since 1 out of 4 victims suffer both digital harassment and physical stalking. Particularly widespread is the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, which thrives in digital spaces due to insufficient protective measures (ISTAT, 2024).

Among Italian teenagers, sexist stereotypes intersect with abusive digital behaviors. Save the Children (2024) highlights that their romantic relationships steadily convey controlling behaviors, such as demands for geolocation or account access. While intimate image sharing is widespread

(28%), especially among males (40%), non-consensual distribution reflects a troubling disregard for consent (about 10% report to have been victims or perpetrators of non-consensual distribution).

Furthermore, public discourse in Italy reflects the polarized nature of responses to OGBV. Amnesty International (2024) reveals an entrenched culture of misogynistic hate speech targeting women in public life, aiming to undermine their credibility through gendered insults. Conversely, ISTAT's (2024) analysis of digital narratives surrounding gender-based violence shows that stigma and victim-blaming remain alarmingly pervasive, amplifying the emotional toll on victims.

With these alarming data in the background, research on OGBV has mostly problematized the experience of those who suffer it (Belotti et al., 2022; Freed et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2017 among others) while critically investigating the interplay between digital platform usage practices and misogynistic socio-cultural repertoires (Comunello et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2019; Suzor et al., 2019 among others). Our work contributes to this strand of studies by problematizing the role of the political economy of digital platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018) from the emic perspective of those who struggle against gender-based violence in and beyond the digital realm.

Addressing the issue of misogyny and gender-based violence from the perspective of the online experiences of particularly sensitized users (such as activists and practitioners) entails, in our view, recognizing its pervasive and systemic nature, which materializes in everyday practices. Online spaces often represent the contexts where such phenomena are most likely 'normalized' —i.e., perceived as an 'inevitable' part of the experience. Moreover, the engagement with digital environments is not an occasional occurrence but a condition deeply integrated into the individuals' daily lives.

It should also be noted that technological advancements, the widespread availability of digital devices, the gradual closing of the access gaps, and the extensive/intensive use of digital platforms —across genders and generations— risk to obscure that the initial design of the Internet was mostly a male prerogative, entrusted to a techno-élite of computer scientists and electronic engineers composed essentially of men. These social groups exercised control over codes and developed rigid techno-communicative protocols (Galloway, 2004) which imprinted a specific, non-universal mark on digital environments.

Our goal is to understand how, in the experience of activists and practitioners engaged against gender-based violence, technological architectures (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and operational mechanisms of digital platforms (i.e., datafication, commodification and curation, Van Dijck et al., 2018) are intertwined with user practices and broader socio-cultural repertoires thus favoring abusive and misogynistic practices, but also to provide users (especially women, LGBTQIA+ persons and other marginalized communities) with resources for resistance and self-determination.

After accounting for the theoretical and methodological framework that underpins our research design, in this article we will discuss what emerged from the interviews we carried out with Italian activists and practitioners engaged in countering gender-based violence through digital tools, educational initiatives and/or political actions.

Gender and digital technologies as entwined categories

Our research approaches digital technologies and gender as "entwined categories" (Lerman et al., 2003), which shape and are shaped by social structures and cultural practices.

Digital technologies enable abusive behaviors, such as online harassment and misogynistic hate speech (Jones et al., 2020; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018), non-consensual or intrusive dissemination of intimate images (Amundsen, 2021; Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020), cyberstalking and doxxing (Douglas et al., 2019; Ecker & Metzger-Riftkin, 2020), as a result of the intersection of platform affordances (i.e., the technological configuration of platforms that invites users to certain usages and to which users assign specific meanings)[1] and modes of governance (i.e., the combination of rules imposed on and by platforms)[2] (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). This unveils that digital platforms are non-neutral environments in terms of power relations, but rather generate mechanisms that hierarchize content and users (Gillespie, 2010), reflecting and reinforcing power asymmetries and structural inequalities. In this regard, Liao (2024) suggests reasoning in terms of "platformization of misogyny," to indicate the role of digital platforms in manufacturing and amplifying misogyny through the platforms' design, features, and the algorithmic shaping of sociality on the one hand, and through the users' appropriation of their affordances on the other hand.

Research in this field has indeed emphasized that digital media are characterized by actual "gendered affordances" (Schwartz & Neff, 2019) based on misogynistic socio-cultural repertoires

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[1] The concept of affordances emerged as a crucial analytical tool in the communication and design studies (Nagy & Neff, 2015; Evans et al., 2017) to name the range of possibilities and constraints that a cultural artifact provides for to its users (Davis & Chouinard, 2016), thus acknowledging technological efficacy without accepting technological determinism (Neff et al., 2012). Katz & Aakhus (2002), for example, identified "perpetual contact" as a typical dynamic of mobile communication given by the combination of the affordances of availability and portability (which rule how much, where and when we communicate). Conversely, boyd (2010) identified persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability of online content as the main affordances of social network sites, which give rise to three specific dynamics, i.e. invisibility of audiences, the collapse of contexts and the blurring of the boundary between public and private spheres.

[2] By platform governance, we refer to the way digital platforms regulate online activities by carefully positioning themselves with strategic claims for what they do and do not (Gillespie, 2010). They are placed in the mediascape as hosts and organizers of user content for public circulation, without having produced or commissioned it. In this, they rely on policies that specify their liabilities and, at the same time, have taken on the responsibility of policing users' activity. Such a combination of "governance of" and "governance by" platforms (Gillespie, 2017) define both the regulatory framework we impose on platforms, and the ways in which they impose their own rules, thus benchmarking the parameters for how public speech online is privately governed.

available to both digital users and technology designers, upon which the former draw for online interaction and the latter for usability programming. Such affordances might hence fuel discriminatory and harassing discourses or even abusive behaviors against women, girls and LGBTQIA+ individuals, while reinforcing misogynistic culture and hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). At the same time, the interplay between social norms and technological infrastructures might enable or disable users' disclosure decisions, hence shaping their online performance of gender identity (Duguay, 2016).

Belonging to this strand of research are also all those studies that have investigated how computer applications discriminate against women, LGBTQIA+ persons, and people with disabilities, incorporating and reinforcing sexist, racist, and ableist prejudices (Wachter-Boettcher, 2017; Noble, 2018), as well as those that have problematized how standard practices in data science reinforce social inequalities based on gender and other intersected factors (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

For instance, Lupton (2015) unveils the risks behind the apps used to self-track sexual and reproductive activities, which end up perpetuating stereotypes and normative assumptions about women as sexual and reproductive subjects. Pavan's (2017) analysis of tech companies' policies shows that their terms of service refer to legal benchmarks and standards that are not gender-neutral and hence are inadequate to assess the acceptability of digital behavior or content related to gender. Chatterjee and colleagues (2018) report that perpetrators increasingly install spyware on their partners' devices to track their location and monitor communications, encouraged by advertisements and customer support services, and facilitated by the absence of adequate antivirus and anti-spyware tools. Studies on digital platforms in the tourism sector highlight that these latter do not provide concrete protection against sexism and homophobia perpetrated by the hosts (O'Regan & Choe, 2017), and end up thickening additional care work on women (Jarrett, 2015). On the other hand, Bivens (2017) demonstrates that the Facebook software allowing users to choose nonbinary gender identification options is only a façade since nonbinary users are later reconfigured back into a binary system. Scheuerman and colleagues (2019), instead, show that facial analysis services are incapable of classifying nonbinary genders. Stringhi (2022), instead, reveals the weakness of curation by moderation since moderators lack a clear, steady, certain and fair response to reported episodes of cyberviolence (Stringhi, 2022).

All these studies call into question the political economy of digital platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018), as both their architectural components (i.e., data, algorithms, terms of service, business

model, etc.)[3] and operating mechanisms (i.e., datafication, commodification, and curation)[4], designed to organize users' interactions, can encapsulate misogynistic values, norms, and beliefs inherent in the patriarchal society in which the same digital platforms are designed and used. But are activists and practitioners engaged in countering gender-based violence aware of such an interplay between misogynistic culture and the political economy of platforms? How do they perceive and interpret OGBV? And what actions and/or reasoning do they deploy to address it?

The infrastructural turn in (digital) activism and the importance of awareness

Latest studies on digital activism have adopted an "infrastructural turn" (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019) to highlight how activists' tactical usage of digital platforms is becoming increasingly savvy to the point of giving rise to actual "contentious politics of data" (Beraldo & Milan, 2019) and "algorithmic resistance" (Bonini & Treré, 2024; Velkova & Kaun, 2021).

Indeed, activists exert agency towards big data and assign specific meanings to datafication (Mattoni, 2020) in ways that make data both the tool and the goal of struggle (Milan, 2017). Data feminism (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020) fits rightly into this way of rethinking and challenging data science informed by praxeological and committed knowledge. It has to do with the creative, intellectual and emotional work of feminist activists and practitioners who fill the gap of missing data (es., those about feminicides) by producing their own counterdata with restorative and transformative purposes (D'Ignazio, 2024).

Moreover, activists deal with opaque algorithmic curation in resourceful ways: by trial-and-error, they intercept the variables computed by algorithms and exploit them to gain visibility, prevent the blocking of content, and hijack its intended motive (Trerè & Bonini, 2022). For example, Sued et al. (2022) demonstrate the effectiveness of the algorithmic-mediated visibility strategy adopted by some feminist movements, which combines the platform vernaculars configuration link to high-visibility micro-celebrities and public figures, with actual algorithmic resistance practices challenging commercial and follower-based logics. As synthesized by Dragiewicz et al. (2018), feminist activists deploy collective counter-abuse tactics, ranging

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[3] Digital platforms are programmable architectures powered by data (related to content and users), automated by algorithms (i.e., mathematical formulas transforming input data into output data), organized into interfaces, formalized within ownership relationships oriented by specific business models, which then regulate relationships with users through terms of service (van Dijck et al., 2018). The "architecture" is the conceptual design that describes the relationships between a platform and its associated applications and services that actually shape users' possibilities for action (boyd, 2010; Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

[4] Digital platforms are governed by three specific mechanisms: datafication (i.e., the ability of platforms to collect and circulate data), commodification (i.e, the ability of platforms to monetize users' online activities) and curation (i.e., the ability of platforms to filter and orient users' online activities) (van Dijck et al., 2018).

from advocacy activities (denouncing different forms of gender-based violence) to circumventing bot-based activities (coordinating action against harassers while sanctioning behaviors) and intervention activities (exposing and unmasking gendered hate speech).

These strands of studies point to the awareness that digital activists develop about digital platforms' logics, which works as a magnifying glass on the sense-making activated by users in their relationship with multiple digital platforms (Cotter, 2019; Espinoza-Rojas et al., 2023). In this regard, literature has highlighted three constitutive dimensions of awareness: cognition (what people know about an issue), affect (how people feel about an issue), and behavior (what people do about an issue) (Kruger & Kearney, 2006; Siles et al., 2022). These three components may materialize and combine with each other also in the user-platform relationship, posing new socio-digital inequalities for unaware users as well as new emancipatory options for conscious users (Gran et al., 2020).

First, users develop actual "folk theories" to account for how technological architectures work (Siles, 2023), and they do so by drawing upon both practical actions performed with digital platforms and supplementing exogenous knowledge (Espinoza-Rojas et al., 2023). Second, users develop an affective attachment towards algorithmic recommendations, with feelings and emotions influencing their digital actions (Bucher, 2016). Third, users concretely resort to digital platforms to perform certain identities and/or advocate for certain positionings, based on the integrative needs to belong to specific social groups (Espinoza-Rojas et al., 2023) and adhere to common usage practices (Cotter, 2019).

Therefore, scrutinizing users' awareness allows welding the caesura between technological architectures and digital usages, especially when it comes to activists' practices. It ultimately means adopting an emic perspective that values those software and hardware characteristics that, in the direct experience of users, encode possibilities for action and that, for this very reason, legitimize users' perceptions for the definition of technologies' qualities (i.e., "imagined affordances", Nagy & Neff, 2015). In other words, the analytical lens of users' awareness is essential for understanding how technological affordances and platform logics enable different actions for different users, within a framework of cultural and institutional legitimacy (Davis & Chouinard, 2016).

If one has an interest in identifying possible gender-based violent properties of digital platforms (and possible anti-violent actions to be implemented, inside and outside the digital realm), then it is imperative to focus on the perception and awareness of users such as activists and practitioners who, fighting against gender-based violence inside and outside the digital realm on a daily basis, have a privileged point of view on the role digital platforms play in such a phenomenon.

Methods

Such an analytical focus on activists' perceptions of the role digital platforms play in OGBV emerged inductively from our research results, since our qualitative research design deliberately left room for data-driven interpretive analyses. Indeed, we chose semi-structured interview as data collection technique, in order to aggregate personal experiences, stimulate reflective thinking, and generate moments of learning (i.e., "narrative approach," Gherardi & Poggio, 2009); and we adopted an abductive logic in data processing, in order to overcome the deduction vs induction opposition (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022) and obtain a more effective "thematic analysis" (Guest et al., 2011) as for data description and interpretation.

Specifically, we reached about twenty Italian individuals and collectives engaged in countering gender-based violence through digital tools, educational initiatives and/or political actions. Interviewees included spokespersons of anti-violence centers (i.e., Telefono Rosa; Trento; Catania; DIRE National Network), feminist political collectives (i.e., Lucha Y Siesta; BeFree Cooperative), gender-sensitive educational associations (i.e., SCOSSE; Cattive Maestre; Save the Children), and social organizations engaged in fostering women's empowerment in the digital realm (i.e., Viola; MamaChat; SheTech; SisTech), along with influ-activists debating gender issues (i.e., Benedetta Lo Zito; Richard Thunder; Jessica G. Senesi; Ethan Caspani) and collectives engaged in digital self-defense with feminist stance (i.e., Chayn Italia; CIRCE).

The interview outline asked activists and practitioners to: 1) Define OGBV and its characteristics from their own experience and posture; 2) Express their opinions about the role platforms (can) play in fomenting or countering gender-based violence (both online and offline); 3) Imagine solutions that make digital environments safer and more inclusive. The responses were transcribed by anonymizing the interviewees' personal data and only mentioning their collective and/or public affiliations (name of collectives at which they work or militate; name of celebrity account).

Activists' awareness about the interplay between gender-based violence and digital platform logics

Overall, Italian activists acknowledge the potential inclusivity of digital spaces, but they are very much aware of the potentially violent implications that certain affordances and/or operating mechanisms of digital platforms might have for women and LGBTQIA+ individuals. When arguing

that, respondents demonstrate different types of "factual" awareness, matured in the different fields they are engaged in, which make them capable of suggesting diverse albeit surprisingly "old-fashioned" solutions to make digital environments safer and more inclusive.

In this section we scrutinize these findings in depth, approaching them as sub-themes that specify the main emerging one related to the activists' awareness about the interplay between gender-based violence and digital platform logics.

A potential for inclusivity along with imagined "violent" affordances

According to many of our interviewees, some technological affordances (e.g., availability, portability, searchability) facilitate networking activities and exposure to sensitive societal issues. This clearly emerges from the words of the feminist influ-activist @benedettalozito, who reveals the inclusive potential of the platform ecosystem and its operating mechanisms. Digital platforms enable marginalized groups, such as disabled people, to overcome physical barriers and engage in activities of their interest.

> *It gives you this great idea of connection, […] of empowerment [...]. So many people who can't physically participate in [physical] spaces […] have been given the possibility to open a phone and inform themselves about what they are interested in [...]. I think the good part is, precisely, the hyper-connectedness, [...] to know that, if you today can't get out of bed [...] and you can't leave the house [for example, because of a disability], you know that there is a possibility to find a connection with those community claims that are important to you. (@benedettalozito)*

This view of the inclusive potential of digital platforms should come as no surprise, since the realm of social, political and/or cultural activism from which our interviewees come has been pioneering in capturing the community-building power of digital platforms. And this is felt even more strongly when it comes to initiatives activated in the digital realm against gender-based violence. As the spokesperson from VIOLA (an App designed to enhance personal safety when users are alone, by providing real-time assistance) argues, "One thing that [Viola's users] appreciate is this sense of community, this idea that there are real people behind the screen."

According to our interviewees, social media in particular enable users to inhabit safe spaces where they discover and affirm their gender identity. As pointed by @RichardThunder (a young transgender boy and LGBTQIA+ activist), this is especially true for transgender people, who may perform actual digital self-determination practices on social media, such as gender swapping,

coming out stories, and transitional videos, protected by the social networking affordances that agglutinate intimate networked publics online.

> *On the Internet you can be whoever you want. For a lot of trans people [...], it's a way to discover yourself, to introduce yourself as male, female or whatever, without the social stigma, the fear of doing it for real (i.e., in-person) with classmates [or] with family. […] You introduce yourself to them without saying you're trans, and [hence] you live your life quietly. So, it can be an affirmative experience. (@RichardThunder)*

Obviously, these are social media usage practices that enhance users' choices, without credits of the technological infrastructure. A clarification, this latter, that the activists of Lucha y Siesta (i.e., home-shelter for women on pathways out of violence as well as feminist collective space experimenting intersectional gender policies) are keen to make explicit when it comes to mentioning virtuous experiences of digital self-consciousness, precisely to prove that activists recognize the boundaries between what is the merit of platform design and what is the merit of users' media choices.

> *I started following […] trans groups from around the world. [...] They are inclusive, […] very useful for coming out, for recognition [...]; so that's also why social media are very important for self-determination. However, is that single person who created that group [that is inclusive], not who thought of the social [medium]. (Lucha y Siesta)*

Indeed, all respondents agree that virtuous or violent usages of digital media depend on the users; however, they also acknowledge that platform logics play a pivotal role because digital technology is not gender-neutral. Consequently, technological architectures might fuel OGBV, which eventually sits on a "continuum" with offline forms of gender-based violence, because platform affordances "interfere" with (and hence amplify) the misogynistic culture that nurtures this latter.

More specifically, some respondents point to the collapsing contexts and invisible audiences generated by the affordances of persistence and searchability (boyd, 2010) as dynamics that may facilitate exposure to specific forms of OGBV based on anonymity, which disinhibits the perpetrator while disorientating the victim. This is the case of non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, for instance: according to representatives of Chayn (i.e., feminist platform countering gender-based violence and sexism through digital tools and collaborative practices), this is "a rampant phenomenon" precisely because "you send an intimate picture, and you think you're sending it to one person, [that] it ends up there; and instead, it gets spread all over the

place [...]." That is, the socio-technical dynamics triggered by persistence and searchability facilitate forms of misogynistic abuse committed through the circulation of images, which most often aim to reassert male power over women disguised as goliardery.

According to the spokesperson of BeFree (i.e., a social cooperative whose practitioners work in anti-violence and anti-trafficking centers, while experimenting with innovative practices), social media also blur the boundaries between what is sharable and what should remain private, which basically represents the dark side of the socio-technical dynamics typical of such platforms (boyd, 2010): they enable behaviors (especially among young people) that violate the partner's consent even unintentionally, simply because it can be done easily, without proper garrisons.

> *There is an extreme ease of dissemination of content […] created for ephemeral use. I'm referring to the meme, for example: [...] I see it, read it, laugh and turn it around to a group that I think might appreciate it. [...] And then it's hard to distinguish [this situation] from [that in which] a girl [...] sends you a picture that you like: that is, it's hard to pull the brake and say, "Wait, this is different stuff from a meme!" […] and not turn it in the [WhatsApp group] of the […] soccer friends (BeFree)*

According to VIOLA's personnel, anonymity also facilitates episodes of gender-based hate speech and trolling, which typically "makes it easier to attack people [...], [because] it gives some security to people who commit hate crimes". This is why they privilege digital environments like LinkedIn: it "makes conversations much more pleasant, much more respect-based because it doesn't offer anonymity" and hence "you see what [and how] anyone [...] comments [your posts]."

Furthermore, many interviewees acknowledge social networking platforms' characteristics similar to what boyd (2010) call as "replicability and scalability" as well as to what Katz and Aakhus (2002) define as "perpetual contact" of mobile communication. According to them, such features expand the space and time of circulation of violent content, thus making it imperishable enough to perpetuate the violence. In this regards, members of CIRCE (i.e., a feminist collective of hacktivists engaged with digital self-defense training) denounce the dangers behind the "superpower" that social media entrusts to users: potentially infinite and yet invisible audiences can be reached quickly by abusive content, because of the ease of sharing that digital interfaces suggest to users.

> *That's what technology does: […] it gives us extra capabilities, so I can get farther, more and more people can see me [...]. The other element is the speed of dissemination: [...] with the superpower that the web gives us, to get things*

> *everywhere, it's just a moment that gender-based violence takes on unprecedented dimensions. [...] The most serious thing [...] is that, once the material through which the violence is perpetrated starts to go around online, it is not really possible to take it down. So, it [...] becomes totally out of control. (CIRCE)*

In this regard, activists from Chayn refer to pervasiveness precisely to name a specific affordance of social media platforms imagined as "violent" per se. It results from the merge between two affordances, availability (how much/when reachable we are) and portability (where/when we communicate), which facilitate specific forms of digital (gender) violence.

> *As the main characteristic of digital violence, and not just of gender-based one, [...] we usually cite "pervasiveness," that is, the possibility that violence occurs anywhere, anytime, and everywhere. We used to cite cyberstalking: you no longer need to stand under the house, school or office of the woman you want to stalk, follow and control; you can easily do it 24/24 via various tools and devices (Chayn)*

"Complicit" operating mechanisms

Building on these considerations around the architectures of digital platforms (in particular, social media), many of the respondents point the finger at the for-profit logics that oversee the political economy of platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018), noting an alarming lack of consent culture and gender sensitivity. According to them, this is what makes platforms' operating mechanisms actual "complicits" in OGBV.

Specifically, they believe that datafication and commodification reveal the weakness of platforms' consent-gathering practices, (only supposedly) designed to protect users, which in turn call into question how consensus is broadly conceived and practiced in society. In this regard, the reflection proposed by the representatives of Save The Children Italia (i.e., Italian branch of a leading independent international organization that fights to save girls and boys living in at-risk conditions), is very revelatory. They consider the demand for explicit consent that web-based services ask users in order to process their data as a form of blackmail (i.e., if you do not consent, you do not have access to the service) that reveals the upstream conceptual shallowness (and hence the downstream heuristic failure) of explicit consent, exactly as happens in many cases of sexual abuse, in which agreeing with a "Yes" does not necessarily equate with an actual willingness to take part in the sexual intercourse.

> *We use so many applications, [...] of which we accept the fact that they give [information] to third parties. [...] To use them, the only obligation we have is to give consent. [...] But what consent is it if, to use [a platform], I have to say "Yes,*

use my data […]"? Because that's what Apps make money on! I mean, it's not like they're nonprofit! This tells us about where the concept of "consent" comes from, […] and how we interpret it at all levels, [including] the level related to sexual violence. [...] The moment you consider "consent" to be a "Yes" given under duress, […] we're in that definition of overt, explicit consent [that] is absolutely not enough. (Save The Children)

According to the interviewees, these same mechanisms based on collecting and peddling data opacify the risks associated with the circulation of such data, which end up generating an actual algorithmic discrimination at the expense of women (Noble, 2018; Wachter-Boettcher, 2017), or profiled advertising that invades their privacy (Lupton, 2015). This is an issue particularly felt, for example, by Chayn activists, who denounce the datafication of digital devices and services as a form of surveillance exercised over women's bodies.

The first thing that comes to mind with respect to digital gender violence is "cyberstalking," that is, surveillance. So, we all live in surveillance capitalism and we are constantly connected and using tools that track our activities, operations, emotions [...]; however, this, combined with the sexist and misogynistic matrix of this kind of violence, really breeds monsters. Because [...] there are cases of women being monitored for months without their knowledge through tools that maybe they thought were harmless, like the smart refrigerator, the smart TV or the workout bracelets. [...] Not only on social media […], but also [...] from the smartwatch to the […] period-tracking Apps. [...] We take it for granted that there is no risk, but we are making that data accessible, and it can be used against us, […] precisely to exercise gender-based violence. (Chayn)

In this sense, Chayn's practitioners knot their technical reasoning, even the more sophisticated ones about the surveillance society operated by digital platforms, to the logics by which patriarchal society operates, to keep vivid the intertwining of two operating systems that give rise to specific forms of gender violence.

On its part, curation by personalization is reported as anchoring audiences to more and more abusive content, leaning on the deception of relying on users' preferences while taking tech companies off the hook. According to CIRCE's hacktivists, for example, the algorithmic profiling ends up functioning as a dog chasing his own tail, in the sense of creating actual echo chambers around users that lead to an exacerbation of violent content, which is in turn profitable for tech companies capturing more and more audience traffic.

Based on [...] how fast you swipe, how many likes you put up, what you tend to see, what your contacts are, [...] you are offered certain content rather than others,

and as you go along, this content [...] becomes more and more extreme. Because they need to be more and more extreme to keep you more and more attached [...]. [This operates] at the algorithm level, which nobody really knows how it's designed, because it's a trade secret. (CIRCE)

Moreover, according to the SCOSSE spokeswoman (i.e., social association active in the field of education to respect differences and deconstruct stereotypes, with projects of professional training and development, research and communication activities), curation by personalization also creates actual filter bubbles around users that contribute to the (potentially exponential) growth of gender-based violence because it prevents them from being exposed to more gender-sensitive discourses.

The mechanism of the algorithm whereby you only ever see the same things, […] that kind of pushy categorization seems limiting to me, it seems like a risk [especially] with [young] people, who are discovering the world and [...] so they should look at a lot of things and then maybe choose from wide content. (Scosse)

Curation by trend, instead, is accused of entailing risks of polarizing debate, opacifying social diversity and even perpetrating violent acts, at the expense of the digital environments' democratic nature. The representative of Telefono Rosa (i.e., association devoted to helping women victims of violence and abuse with prevention, reporting and support activities), in this regard, mentions the case of the rape videos that have been viralized on TikTok, precisely to denounce how the calculus of spreadability made by the platform is, in fact, responsible both for secondary violence on victims of sexual violence and for fueling the macho voyeurism that surround it.

[On] Tik Tok [...] you have these trends that are very fast. [...] Even on rape: [think about] what happened in Palermo for example! The first platform that was touched [to film the girl's gang rape] was Tik Tok. (Telefono Rosa)

According to our participants, tech companies exonerate themselves from responding about their contribution to the gender-based violence proliferation by explaining the "luck" of certain violent content as caused by the users' tastes and choices, and by leveraging the alleged objectivity of the mathematical formulas encapsulated in the algorithms. This is why many of our interviewees also try to deploy counter-curation mechanisms in the digital spaces they inhabit, interposing themselves as a filter between the visibility regime imposed by algorithms and the users; something different from the data feminism theorized by D'Ignazio and Klein (2020), but

still interfering with digital platforms logics according to the same stance of countering algorithmic curation.

Influ-activist @RichardTurner, for example, denounces how gender-based hate speech and trolling find fortune in YouTube: the platforms' virality logics exponentially reward video content that attracts violent or divisive comments; therefore, he manually cancels these types of comments because he does not prioritize algorithm-based virality over caring.

> *Reading newspaper articles on social media can be very difficult, especially because of the comments under the articles. [...] It is known that the same [news] outlets usually start with the negative comments, just [...] to make the post go viral [...]. Even going to read the comments under [the] YouTube [videos] can be very difficult. In fact, on my YouTube channel [...] I read the comments that come in and delete all the negative ones because [...] I don't have the philosophy of "One comment makes the video go more viral because of the algorithm". (@RichardTurner)*

For all these reasons, the curation by moderation mechanism also ends up under indictment. According to many respondents, content moderators in charge of evaluating the appropriateness of content circulating online lack appropriate gender-sensitive skills, thus confirming what already reported by Stringhi (2022). According to the spokespeople for BeFree and Scosse, they are not responsive enough when actual violent content is flagged by users, and are instead unnecessarily censorious when nonviolent content is flagged by algorithms.

> *If I see inappropriate content, I report it but [...] almost always I am told [...] "We checked, and this content does not violate the standards of the platform." [...] So, the platforms are [just] pretending to be interested in what the content is, because clearly the more divisive a piece of content is, [...] the more they make money from it, right? (BeFree)*

> *My mind goes to the Telegram groups that incite rape [or] that look for rape videos: [...] it's constant violence for the person who has already been through it, and so [...] I would make sure that certain content was flagged [...] or that there is a filter. [...] I mean, [you, platform], don't shadow-ban the nipple of a woman who wants to take a picture of herself with her nipple out […] because she likes to do it. Rather, shadow-ban everything that's not consensual! (Scosse)*

"Factual" awareness leading to "old-fashioned" solutions

Based on how respondents gain awareness about the socio-technical matrix of OGBV, we identified two types of awareness, both inherently "factual" in that they are rooted in the

activities carried out by the respondents themselves. That is, the behavior as constitutive component of awareness prevails and effectively combines with the other two constitutive dimensions, affect and cognition (Kruger & Kearney, 2006; Siles et al., 2022).

The first type of awareness is the "praxeological (or experiential)" one: this is inductively accrued, by behavior and affect, in the daily practices of those involved in countering gender-based violence, on and beyond digital platforms. It is the awareness of practitioners in anti-violence centers, educators, or activists militating against gender-based violence and sexist discrimination in certain socio-economic sectors (e.g., school, workplace, public institutions) or among certain segments of the population (e.g., young people, immigrants).

The genealogy of awareness accrued by members of Cattive Maestre ("Bad Teachers", i.e., a collective of feminist public school teachers who critically reflect on schools, both as institutions responsible for knowledge transmission and as workplaces) is quite exemplary. From being in contact with their students at school, they problematize issues otherwise untraceable, such as the sexist management of young people's romantic relationships, the overexposure of the female body and the discriminatory sociotechnical dynamics against those who try to escape the fashion aesthetic standards imposed by social media.

> *I am literally taken by storm by female students and their heart issues that take place, however, entirely on social [media]. I mean, these are love stories that have no reality [...], they are maybe crushes [for] friends of friends seen on Instagram or [...] that take place completely out of messages and photos. And in that sense, [...] there is a huge overexposure of girls' bodies. (Cattive Maestre)*

From their teaching experience and the contact with students, "bad teachers" are able to map out the most recurrent forms of gender-based violence among young people and to grade the dangerousness of digitally mediated ones.

> *For example, in class we did a paper on fashion [...] and it was declined all about how some things then have to be shown on Instagram, about the fact that [...] you could also not follow fashion [...] but then you are automatically out of some dynamics [...] of messages and hashtags, whatever. [...] In my opinion, in these issues about "how you look" there are [...] strong exclusion, ghettoization, violence [...]. However, it is more frightening that [...] the most frequent types of violence reported by girls are [those that happen] on the street. [...] I almost have the feeling that in virtual reality they better know how to defend themselves. (Cattive Maestre)*

The second type of awareness we identified is the "scholarly (or technical)" one: this is deductively matured by behavior and cognition, in the practices of study, work and/or activism focused on the digital realm, and not necessarily on gender inequality and violence.

This is the awareness of influ-activists, hacktivists and socio-political organizations engaged in pollinating digital environments with gender-sensitive ideologies and practices. In this regard, the expertise of Chayn's members is exemplary because it denotes a refined competence about how digital infrastructures operate so as to enable them to identify the specificity of the gender-based forms of digital violence they generate and to recognize how it goes unnoticed (among both victims and anti-violence practitioners) simply because it happens online. Their knowledge of the contiguity between online and offline spaces then translates into intervention actions aimed at restoring the gravity due to the episodes that fall under this type of gender-based violence.

> *The tools [that mostly facilitate gender-based violence] certainly are social [media]: [...] instant messaging a lot, and monitoring devices. And certainly one of the forms that we have encountered the most [...] is the nonconsensual dissemination of images. [...] However, [...] having done a project with anti-violence centers [...], we found that women don't talk about digital gender violence, [...] they don't realize that what happens in the digital space is also a form of violence. Besides, not all the workers have such skills that would allow them to recognize this digital violence because [...] it has not been a topic too much addressed. (Chayn)*

Chayn's practitioners also note certain impropriety of language that opacifies the gender-based socio-digital inequalities fostering the perpetration of controlling and abusive behaviors.

> *Too often we talk about cyberviolence, which is a reductive term, because obviously it should not be considered only that violence that happens in social [media]. There is the part [...] that does not necessarily happen online but is "enabled" by technology. [...] It's important to reiterate this concept because [...] there is the very important issue of digital divide: [...] since statistically women are less "tech savvy", [...] less familiar with technology [...] because of a cultural issue, [...] it creates this very important divide that [...] amplifies violence. (Chayn)*

According to Chayn's spokeswomen, then, acknowledging that women are culturally excluded from maturing advanced technological skills is tantamount to admitting that they have fewer tools at their disposal to escape controlling behavior and invasion of privacy as an exercise of male dominance (e.g., by their partners)which is why associations like theirs and like CIRCE have

initiated concrete experiments aimed at "equipping" women to defend themselves against digital violence in all its forms.

Moreover, using generic references such as "cyberbullying" or "cyberstalking" neutralizes the gendered matrix of certain violent phenomena, thus depowering the political reasoning that needs to be done on the phenomenon.

> *You talk about cyberbullying and you don't talk about gender: it's really a way of removing the word gender-based violence that becomes violence tout court, where the [sexist] matrix is not recognized. [...] And it's a very political choice to focus on that stuff there, to say, "We're all victims or potential victims of this thing here; it's not because you're a girl or it's not because of your gender." (Chayn)*

Despite the different genealogies of respondents' awareness, most of them surprisingly agree on the need to increase control and regulation of digital spaces to make them safer and more inclusive. Calling for greater control/regulation of digitally mediated interactions is at odds with the radical stance of some respondents; and yet, this argument, disputing the original libertarian premises of the web and strongly militated precisely by grassroots social movement, prevails. For example, according to members of Sistech Italy (i.e., the Italian branch of a European non-profit empowering refugee women through access to tech & digital jobs), it is precisely the freedom ruling the online social networks today that would allow the proliferation of digitally mediated violent behavior.

> *If I think of a more inclusive social [media] context, I expect more control of discourse because right now the platforms are free. [...] There has to be rules, like in our society, that is, I expect [more] regulated platforms. (SisTech)*

Some interviewees even nostalgically recall digital environments from the past in which, in their experience, it was possible to perform the desired self more fully and one's own agency more consciously. This is the case of BeFree's spokesperson, for instance, who retrospectively appreciate the officers moderating the exchanges in lesbian chat-rooms as a garrison for safe interactions, or the case of CIRCE's members, who fondly remember the sense of control and choice that users experienced when deciding which mailing lists or newsgroups to join, without algorithmic imposition.

> *I go back to […] the Lycos chat [...]. There were the officers who were [...] basically moderators [...] Really broad theme: that of the man profiling himself as a woman*

to be in the chats with lesbians [...]; you immediately called the officer, and the officer immediately deactivated his account. (BeFree)

The newsgroups, the mailing lists. […] You chose them though; it wasn't a platform that created the bubble for you. […] Also, the fact that you had to get there, it meant that it was just what you were looking for, […] it wasn't that you were pulled into it. (CIRCE)

Younger respondents also recall the early stages of social media platforms as safer environments for users' self-determination practices. This is the case of @RichardThunder, for instance, who in hindsight values the early, image-free uses of Facebook precisely because they allowed users to disassociate their online identity from their offline one, and to more fully experiment with their gender performance.

Everything should be as anonymous as it was when I was growing up. […] In my first Facebook profile [...] I didn't have my picture [...] and […] as early as 13/14 years old, I presented myself as a boy: […] no one had to know anything about me, I could [...] invent another person. (@RichardThunder)

On closer inspection, these responses put people and their agency back at the center, building on the respondents' belief that people are actually in charge of designing, managing and using digital platforms. Therefore, people can be trained both about the technical dynamics underlying such platforms and the socio-cultural dynamics underlying gender-based violence.

We can fight to create platforms that are controlled by people and not by the market […]. A truly democratic algorithm should show you the people you follow one after the other [...] unless you look for [something else]. (@benedettalozito)

It should not be for profit and therefore should not be bent to capitalist logic. (Chayn)

Therefore, participants suggest socio-cultural solutions that aim to culturally re-educate tech industry personnel so as to imbue platform architectures and mechanisms with more gender-sensitive values and beliefs. In their perspective, the key is to train vulnerable users, ICT designers, and content moderators to sexism and gender-based violence, so that such updated sensitivities precipitate in relationship management, platform architectures, and possibly also in the creation (or even restoration) of more controlled but safer digital spaces.

> *I would give good training on gender-based violence [to content moderators]. (Scosse)*

> *What is emancipatory is the knowledge, not the tool itself. [...] It works to create women-only groups that work together to self-train [on how] not to get checked with Bluetooth, not to get your phone read, to clear your history... In short, a series of stuff for "digital self-defense" [...] from the male oppressor. (CIRCE)*

Conclusions

Activists and practitioners fighting gender-based violence (whether inside or outside the digital realm) are aware of the socio-technical matrix of OGBV. In their experience (be it praxeological or techno-scientific), the misogynistic culture that oversees gender-based violence as a societal problem also invades online life, not only at the level of digitally mediated relationships between users, but also and especially at the level of platform design and logics. Misogynistic socio-cultural repertoires and the political economy of platforms operate as interconnected systems of inequality to the detriment of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, enhancing the risks of experiencing violence. This is why activists and practitioners mostly propose a socio-cultural solution to OGBV, which in turn calls for a stronger leading role of the human component in socio-technical assemblages (including moderation garrisons). According to them, a security-oriented response to the problem is necessary, although it is not sufficient because OGBV is only partly enabled by digital technologies.

While participants recognize an overall ambivalent, non-neutral nature of digital platforms' affordances (especially social media, which enable both inclusive practices and various forms of OGBV), inclusive and participatory practices are mainly related, in respondents' words, to individual tactics and choices. Conversely, the overall social media ecology, especially when considering its political economy, seems to them to replicate, and even amplify, the discriminatory tensions that characterize our societies.

Respondents recognize how specific affordances (among others, persistence and searchability), together with the business models underlying social media platforms, might reinforce individuals' widespread discriminatory attitudes. Far from being neutral tools, however, digital platforms also leave room for inclusive usages and for the creation of safe spaces for marginalized communities. It comes as no surprise, then, that activists call for socio-cultural solutions to OGBV, emphasizing the role of humans, or for "old fashioned" digital solutions,

namely, digital environments where platform capitalism logics did not show the strength to fully shape affordances and interaction dynamics.

Our findings contribute to the studies conducted so far in the field of OGBV in that they account for the infrastructural dimension of the phenomenon from a privileged and highly qualified perspective, that of those who, before and beyond digital platforms, defend the rights of women and discriminated communities. On the other hand, our research findings also broaden the scope of literature on users' awareness, which mainly focuses on data and algorithm awareness, whereas our work addresses both technological affordances and operating mechanisms of digital platforms. In this way, the sociotechnical issue of OGBV allows for a critical reflection on how to undermine the seemingly misleading rhetoric about the gender-neutrality of technological infrastructures, drawing upon the awareness gained by activists and practitioners who come to terms with it in their daily struggle and training practices.

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