

New UNESCO report warns social media affects girls' well-being, learning and career choices

Paris, 25 April 2024 – A new UNESCO report warns that, while digital technologies can enhance teaching and learning, they also present risks such as the invasion of users' privacy, distraction from learning and cyberbullying. The report sheds light on how social media amplifies gender stereotypes, with negative effects on girls' well-being, learning and career choices.

“Children’s social lives are increasingly playing out on social media. But all too often, algorithm-driven platforms amplify exposure to negative gender norms,” said Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO. “Ethical considerations must be taken into account in the design of these platforms. Social media should not confine women and girls to roles that limit their educational and career aspirations.”

Social media negatively affects well-being and reinforces gender stereotypes

Entitled [Technology on Her Terms](#), the report warns that algorithm-driven, image-based content, especially on social media, can expose girls to material ranging from sexual content to videos that glorify unhealthy behaviours or unrealistic body standards. This exposure can have particularly detrimental effects on girls' self-esteem and body image. In turn, this impacts girls' mental health and well-being, which are essential for academic success.

The UNESCO report cites Facebook's own research, which found that 32% of teenage girls said that, when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse. It also underlines the addictive design of TikTok, characterized by short, engaging videos. This instant-gratification model may affect attention spans and learning habits, making sustained concentration on educational and extracurricular tasks more challenging.

Girls also suffer more cyberbullying than boys. On average, across OECD countries with available data, 12% of 15-year-old girls reported having been cyberbullied, compared to 8% of boys. This situation is compounded by the rise of image-based sexual content, AI-generated deepfakes and 'self-generated' sexual imagery circulating on-line and in classrooms. Female students in several countries interviewed for the report said that they were exposed to pictures or videos they did not want to see.

The results demonstrate the importance of greater investment in education – including media and information literacy – and smarter regulation of digital platforms, in line with [UNESCO's Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms](#), launched in November last year.

Negative gender stereotypes dampen girls' STEM aspirations

All these factors create a feedback loop: in which girls are exposed to negative gender norms that are amplified by social media, are steered away from studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects that are considered male-oriented fields, and are deprived of the opportunity to shape the very tools that expose them to these stereotypes.

According to UNESCO data, women make up only 35% of tertiary STEM graduates around the world, a figure that has not changed in the past 10 years. The report shows that persistent biases deter women from pursuing STEM careers – ultimately resulting in a lack of women in the technology workforce.

Women hold less than 25% of science, engineering, information and communication technologies jobs. They constitute only 26% of employees in data and artificial intelligence, 15% in engineering, and 12% in cloud computing across the world's leading economies. Only 17% of patent applications are filed by women globally.

Evidence shows that the digital transformation is being led by men. Although 68% of countries have policies in place to support STEM education, only half of these policies specifically support girls and women. Policy efforts should seek to promote role models, including on social media, to encourage career choices in STEM among young women. Improving girls' access to STEM studies is key to ensuring that women participate on equal terms in the digital transformation of our societies, and supporting the design of truly inclusive technologies.

About UNESCO

With 194 Member States, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization contributes to peace and security by leading multilateral cooperation on education, science, culture, communication and information. Headquartered in Paris, UNESCO has offices in 54 countries and employs over 2300 people. UNESCO oversees more than 2000 World Heritage sites, Biosphere Reserves and Global Geoparks; networks of Creative, Learning, Inclusive and Sustainable Cities; and over 13 000 associated schools, university chairs, training and research institutions. Its Director-General is Audrey Azoulay.

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed" – UNESCO Constitution, 1945.

More information: www.unesco.org

About The Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM)

Established in 2002, the GEM Report is an editorially independent report, hosted and published by UNESCO. At the 2015 World Education Forum, it received a mandate from 160 governments to monitor and report on progress on education in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular reference to the SDG 4 monitoring framework, and the implementation of national and international strategies to help hold all relevant partners to account for their commitments.

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