OHCHR "KICK-OFF" CONSULTATION ON
GENDER, DIGITAL TECH AND THE ROLE OF BUSINESS

8 December 2021 11h15-12h45
Online on Teams

CONCEPT NOTE

I. Background

Through the B-Tech project, OHCHR seeks to ensure respect for human rights in the development, deployment and use of digital technologies by fostering the uptake and implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) by digital technology companies. The project is designed to increase the use of the UNGPs in the tech industry and regulatory frameworks and to embed respect for human rights in business practices relating to the development and application of digital technology. The project's vision is to see the UNGPs promoted and applied – by companies, States, investors, and civil society – so that respect for human rights and dignity for all are at the heart of the 21st Century digital economy. The project is structured along four strategic focus areas, namely: Addressing human rights risks in business models; Human Rights Due Diligence and end-use; Accountability and remedy; and the State's duty to protect, or regulatory and policy responses. An additional work stream looks at the role of investors in shaping the behavior of technology companies.

While recognizing the potential of new technologies to contribute to the empowerment of women and gender equality, these technologies have not yet delivered what they promise to deliver and women cannot yet take full advantage of the benefits of the Internet and communication technologies without being exposed to major risks to their mental and physical integrity in many jurisdictions. Rather on the contrary, digital technologies might exacerbate the marginalized situation of women in a "datafied" environment. Digital technologies carry inherent risks which have already too often materialized in privacy, safety and security breaches, including through surveillance. Online stalking and online harassment, surveillance and privacy breaches, doxing, trolling, and the unauthorized use and manipulation of personal information, including images and videos, are some of the examples where violence against women is stemming from or linked to digital technologies. These instances of digital abuse are even more acute when women lack the digital skills and awareness around emerging issues linked to digital technologies for the respect of their rights online and offline, hindering them to safeguard themselves against such violence.

Digital technologies have been reported to amplify and perpetuate gender biases and stereotypes, and leading to algorithmic discrimination – for example, in the context of employment advertising and recruitment tools. Facial recognition technologies have also been called out for disproportionality misidentifying women, and marginalizing people of color on top of that, often leading to double marginalization. Beyond the discussing the different types of abuses women face connected to digital technologies, the consultation will also address the role of gender in technology governance and the gaps which perpetuate and exacerbate gender bias and stereotypes.

An emphasis will be placed on the role that technology companies should play to uphold the corporate responsibility to respect human rights, including women's' rights. Through their powerful position across many markets, global and regional technology companies hold important strings to shape the way in which digital technologies impact women and bear the potential to adjust their processes in a rights-respecting manner. The corporate responsibility to respect (Pilar II of the UNGPs) forms the core of this new B-Tech work stream. We will examine how technology companies' responsibilities towards women and girls apply with regard to online impacts. As a part of the environment in which technology companies operate, the work stream will also touch upon the State duty to protect as well as access to remedies.

II.   Modalities of participation

The consultation will take place online through the use of the MS Teams platform.

III.   "Kick off" consultation objectives

Using the prism of the UNGPs and its three pillars addressing the State's duty to Protect, the Corporate Responsibility to Respect, and Access to Remedies, this first consultation will very much be an "open mic" brainstorm session, during which the B-Tech team will count on each invited expert's knowledge and experience to achieve the following key objectives:
- Map out the key issues part of the scope of this new B-Tech work stream;
- Identify a roadmap for each of these key issues/sub-work stream, as well as the set of key stakeholders to engage with;
- Discuss the type of output(s) which would be useful for relevant stakeholder groups