

Why Digital Capitalism is Sexist
And How to Resist

THE THREAT

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An extract from September Publishing



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2022 by September Publishing

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Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, www.refinecatch.com

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 9781912836970

Ebook ISBN 9781912836987

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

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INTRODUCTION

On the night between the 4th and 5th of January 2013, 14-year-old Carolina Picchio threw herself out of her bedroom window in Novara, Piedmont. She left a few messages: some for her loved ones, and some for the Internet users who had tormented her for weeks.

Two months before, Carolina had been to a party at a friend's house. They had ordered pizzas and passed round a few bottles of vodka, and Carolina had had a lot to drink. She was vomiting in the toilet and had almost passed out, when seven boys she was friendly with, more or less her age, came in and turned on their iPhone cameras. They cornered her, molested her and made sure to film every single moment. The morning after, they shared the videos on a school chat thread.

From private exchanges, the images quickly spread on social networks, where they attracted the attention of Carolina's friends and acquaintances, and of hundreds of strangers. Via Facebook and WhatsApp, she received over 2,600 insulting messages. She was called a 'slut' and was told she was 'disgusting' and that people would have liked to 'spit on her'. She had no memory of the night of

the party, but was forced to re-experience it until she ceased to find her life worth living.

Despite several requests to do so, Mark Zuckerberg's platform, Facebook, did not remove the cyberbullies' comments until after Carolina's suicide.

* * *

On the 17th of March 2010, another teenager had jumped out of a window. Her name was Tian Yu, and the window was that of a Chinese factory where she worked over 12 hours per day assembling iPhones, such as those used by Carolina's persecutors.

That factory is part of a humongous complex owned by Foxconn, a multinational electronics supplier to which Apple and other tech giants outsource the manufacturing of their appliances. Yu's family, living in the countryside, struggled to make ends meet, so she had become a factory worker to help them pay their bills. When she signed her first contract with Foxconn, Yu was about three years older than Carolina.

Every morning, Yu woke up at 6.30 a.m., attended a compulsory unpaid meeting at 7.20 a.m. and did not leave her position in the assembly line until 7.40 p.m., usually being forced to skip dinner to work overtime. She had to ask permission to use the toilet and the walls around her were covered in posters with 'motivational' sentences such as 'Growth, thy name is suffering' and 'A harsh environment is a good thing'.

When Yu jumped out of the building, Foxconn owed her a month's salary plus overtime pay because of an administrative oversight. She had no money left and her mobile phone had broken,

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leaving her unable to ask for help. Neither could she reach out to any of her co-workers; they were all so exhausted that they had never talked to one another before.

You will be glad to know that, unlike Carolina Picchio, Tian Yu survived her fall. She remained, however, paralysed from the waist down. In 2010 alone, 17 other workers from the same Foxconn factory attempted suicide, and most of them succeeded. Apple founder Steve Jobs defended his subcontractor, arguing that suicides at Foxconn were ‘below China’s national average’.

* * *

This book looks at what is perhaps the most important event of the last 30 years: the *digital revolution*. It looks at it through the eyes of the women who are harmed by it globally. These women come from all walks of life. Some of them, like Carolina Picchio, are victimised through digital devices. Others, like Tian Yu, are exploited while producing them. And some do not even have access to the Internet, but are brutally raped in wars funded by minerals that make our tablets work.

After years of unimpeded enthusiasm towards all things tech, our views have become more critical and nuanced. For example, we have started to pay attention to controversial practices such as data mining, online surveillance and algorithmic bias. We are also increasingly aware of the relationship between technology and gender inequalities (among other things, we speak a lot of ‘online hate’ against women and LGBTQ+ people). But we have only just started to connect the dots, and the more connections we draw, the less pleasant the picture is to look at. As I write, millions of women

across the world are violated, exploited and marginalised due to processes of technological change, and in many more ways than we may realise.

I will attempt to shed light on how all this might have happened, proposing an explanation based on the tight intersections between technology, patriarchy and capitalism. Because the heart of the matter, in my opinion, is precisely that the digital revolution has taken place in a capitalistic and patriarchal society. This has profoundly shaped the way digital devices are designed and built, how we utilise them and who does or does not have access to them, which can cause considerable repercussions for women's civil and social rights.

Just to clarify, I *won't* be trying to convince you that the advent of digital technologies has had no benefits for women, or for the rest of humankind. Like all of you, I am grateful for the tools that allow me to access information, connect with my friends and family, and simplify my daily tasks. After all, I am writing on a laptop with a Wi-Fi connection, making massive use of online archives and search engines. As a feminist, I also appreciate the role that digital innovations have played in campaigns such as #MeToo and #InternationalWomensStrike, and in helping entire generations of women (including my own) organise and support one another. Of this, however, we know much already. I believe it is the dark side of digital capitalism that should once and for all come to light, together with the strategies to resist.

It also seems to me that we should look at the problem systemically, rather than simply focusing on the aspects that feel closest to home, or in which we can recognise ourselves. I must confess that when I started researching this book I, too, had mostly in mind stories that resonated with me on a personal level, like that of Carolina

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Picchio: a girl who came from the same country as me, and whom it was natural for me to picture as a little sister, or a younger version of myself. But one story leads to another, and the more I explored the ecosystem where tragedies such as Carolina's developed, the more I encountered experiences like Tian Yu's. In the end, I was convinced that it was urgent and necessary to try to explain the links between these different stories, which are equally unacceptable and underpinned by the same power relations.

And now just a couple of necessary clarifications. When I say that I'd like to offer a *global* and *systemic* examination of the digital revolution and of its gendered effects, I do not mean that my own perspective is all-encompassing or universal. Any viewpoint on a given subject is unavoidably influenced by the position from which we observe it. And, of course, it is from a specific point within the *global system* that I am writing these pages and that you are reading them. Plus, my evaluations are also filtered through my own personal circumstances: those of a Southern Italian woman who makes a living as a university researcher in the UK, who can access information in some languages but not others, and who has experienced several of the forms of violence and marginalisation described in this book, but most certainly not all of them. (I, too, for instance, have suffered online harassment, but I've never worked in a factory.) So, in my writing I have done my very best to distinguish my reflections from the accounts I have collected, which I believe can speak for themselves.

Finally, I want to make it plain that I do not consider gender the only relevant lens through which to examine what is happening to us. It is, clearly, not only women who pay a price for the latest technological changes, and some women undoubtedly have it

tougher than others. I have strived as much as possible to adopt in my analysis an intersectional approach: i.e. one sensitive to how women's lives are influenced by factors such as their class, race, sexuality, physical ability and geography.

At the same time, like many feminists before me, I am also convinced that we should reclaim the notion of *woman* as a political category and put it at the centre of both our examination of social phenomena and our fights for a freer, more equal and fairer world. Let's put it like that. Still today, our societies treat women as *the other* – a subaltern subject whose voice and needs are ignored every time we try to develop an accurate view of what's going on in the world. And the digital revolution is certainly no exception. This is why, if we want to judge it more honestly, I think it is from women's voices and women's needs that we should start, however heterogenous they may be.

Not to mention that *placing women at the centre* is helpful not only when diagnosing a social problem, but also when searching for solutions. This is something I'll talk about in Part 3 of the book, where you'll find a few ideas and proposals aimed at *taking back the tech*: that is to say, turning technology into a truly emancipatory force and a leverage to create a better and more just future for women and for all. These inputs are grounded in my years of research and activism at the intersection between digital rights and social and gender justice. But you should know that, most of all, they are inspired by the testimonies of the women you'll read about. My primary goal is to do them justice, and I am certain that, much more than me, they will persuade you that the time has come to face reality and start fighting for better technology and a better world.

PART 1

Digital revolution and vicious circles

CHAPTER 1

Patriarchy 4.0

Not that long ago, British Labour MP Jess Phillips accompanied her 11-year-old son to get a book signed by his favourite author. She noticed that the boy, initially very excited, had begun to look anxious, and kept his back glued to the wall. She wondered whether he might be intimidated by the prospect of meeting his hero, but her son told her, ‘It’s very crowded in there, Mum. It’s best if we stay here, where I don’t risk being attacked.’

While trying to reassure her child, Jess cannot afford the luxury of considering his worries excessive, or letting him live a normal childhood. The police visit their home regularly and have encouraged her to have a panic room fitted in her office, and a locksmith has strengthened the security in her Birmingham house. Before running for election, Jess worked at a women’s aid charity and once elected she brought her feminist views into Parliament. Since she was first elected in 2015, she has criticised gender inequalities within her own party’s executive bodies as vehemently as the

anti-domestic-violence policies of the Tory government. These stances have gained her many enemies, who use social media to make her life impossible.

Everything started in 2015, when Jess had a squabble with a Conservative politician, Philip Davies. During a backbench committee meeting, he suggested that the House of Commons host an event to commemorate International Men's Day. As the only woman on the committee, Jess replied that, to her, every day felt like International Men's Day. Within a few hours, her newsfeed and message boxes filled up with chilling messages. Internet users wrote that she deserved to see her sons hanged on a tree, that they wanted to murder her and lock her in a basement to 'pour molten iron' into her vagina 'until she started vomiting' and 'repeatedly rape her to watch her spirit die'.

Since then, the online assaults have repeated themselves as regular as clockwork, especially on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Once, Jess received over 600 social media threats in a single night. Nor had her tormentors had enough: the day after, she was forced to put up with a new wave of comments, which, this time, declared her 'too ugly to rape'. She dutifully reported the abuse to the relevant social network companies, but mostly to no avail.

Over time, the Birmingham Yardley MP started to suffer from anxiety and panic attacks. While determined not to let herself be affected by the aggressions, she cannot help but think of her colleague and close friend Jo Cox, who was stabbed on the street by a right-wing extremist after having been regularly victimised on the Web. And it doesn't take a genius to understand that the longer threats against female politicians circulate online, the more likely it is that someone may turn them into actions. Suffice it to say that a

man has already been arrested for hiding outside Jess's constituency office with the intention of attacking her.

To this day, Jess Phillips continues to fight for legal interventions aiming to make digital companies more accountable on matters of online violence. When, a couple of years ago, I met her in her Westminster office, she talked to me at length of the three things she found most difficult to bear.

The first was having to invest in her protection the time and energy she would have otherwise devoted to her work and her loved ones. The second was the impact of the abuse on her family, and on the numerous young women who follow her parliamentary activities, many of whom are appalled by the way she is treated and are now afraid of going into politics or even speaking up on the Internet. And the third thing was social media firms' reluctance, in spite of their powerful means and fat profits, to stop the war on women that has been declared on their platforms.

* * *

Let's play a simple game. You tell me what social networks you use (or, if you don't use any, which ones you have seen being used by your best friend, daughter, neighbour, etc.) and I'll tell you how women and girls are treated in those spaces.

Let's start with Facebook, the biggest social media platform on the planet, counting (at the time of writing) about 42 million users in the UK and almost 3 billion globally. Women's and men's experiences of the site, as revealed by several studies, differ rather significantly. The NGO Plan International, for example, has recently surveyed over 14,000 young women worldwide, and discovered that almost

40 per cent of them had been threatened or attacked on Facebook. The second alarming finding: Black, Brown and queer girls are even more at risk, since they attract abuse motivated by both their gender and their racial, sexual or cultural identities. And increasingly robust scientific literature helps us identify other particularly exposed groups: disabled young women¹ and Jewish and Muslim women, regardless of their age.

After Facebook, the worst platforms on which to be a woman seem to be Instagram and WhatsApp, both owned by the same corporate group founded by Mark Zuckerberg, which in 2021 changed its name from Facebook to Meta. Instagram and WhatsApp, just like Facebook itself, are plagued by non-consensual pornography – an exceptionally gruesome form of digital violence, which I will discuss in detail later. To get a sense of the scale of the problem, you only need to look at users’ removal requests. According to several journalistic sources, Meta processes about 500,000 of them every month, all concerning intimate videos or pictures shared without the permission of the people (mostly, the women) appearing in them.

Things are no better on Twitter, a smaller platform but commonly used to comment on politics and current affairs, particularly in English-speaking countries. This characteristic makes it a very toxic arena for politically active women: not only lawmakers like Jess Phillips (or, on the other side of the Atlantic, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Kamala Harris), but also writers, journalists

1 Some people and communities prefer the expression ‘disabled woman’ (or man, or person), while others deem the term ‘woman with disability’ more appropriate. Even within disability justice movements, the question as to which term to use remains open. This is why throughout this book I have decided to use both definitions interchangeably.

and campaigners. In 2018, Amnesty International monitored the tweets addressed to some of these women during ‘hot periods’, such as election campaigns, and calculated they had received a message classified as ‘violent’ or ‘hostile’ every 30 seconds on average (victimisation rates were, once again, especially high among Black and Muslim women).

Video-sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok have their own unique pitfalls. They host staggering volumes of non-consensual pornography and abusive messages directed towards female users and are used for sharing misogynistic ideas and hate speech based on gender, race, religion and sexuality. YouTube, in particular, is swamped with videos teaching how to ‘burst the lies women tell on rape’, or vilifying and sometimes explicitly threatening female celebrities and politicians. It was on YouTube, as it happens, that Jess Phillips got targeted for several years by a number of sexist vloggers. One of them, UKIP’s former candidate to the European Parliament Carl Benjamin, abused her for months before the platform finally prevented him from monetising his uploads.

Now, let me deal with objections on the lines of *But feminists like Jess Phillips were a target well before the advent of social media*. This is certainly true and I would be the last person to deny that our political history is filled with attempts to clip women’s wings and undermine their struggles. I happen to have a passion for biographies of women activists from past centuries and the similarities between the present day and, say, the intimidation campaigns orchestrated against early-twentieth-century suffragettes are not lost on me. Even the special ferocity reserved for minority women is, unfortunately, hardly new. Let us remember that Simone Veil, a Jew, an Auschwitz survivor and the main sponsor of France’s abortion legislation in the 1970s, had

swastikas drawn on her car and received a deluge of anonymous letters stating that ‘the true holocaust was that of unborn children’.

If only for the sake of intellectual and political honesty, though, we should acknowledge that the digital revolution has opened novel and unsettling scenarios. To begin with, it has made public figures like Jess Phillips (or, say, Cambridge classicist Mary Beard, British Labour MP Diane Abbott, or feminist advocate Caroline Criado Perez) even more vulnerable than they previously were. And this is not just about new vehicles for threats and harassment. Many other aspects make digital attacks unique, the first of which is their intrusiveness and their capacity to reach a woman wherever she is, at any time of the day. ‘I get those comments when I least expect them: as I walk down the street, or when I am at home on the sofa with my husband or my kids,’ Jess Phillips explained to me during our chat at Westminster. ‘You can choose not to open an anonymous letter, or to only read correspondence in the office. But you cannot always keep your phone turned off. And, in my case, managing my social media accounts is part of my MP job. I cannot get rid of them, and I wouldn’t think it fair to entirely delegate this to my staff.’

On the flip side, we should bear in mind that public-facing women like Jess tend at least to have access to resources and support. Yet millions of Internet users around the world cannot count on any special protections and they have also become easy prey. Just consider a couple of stats. According to recent estimates, over one third of women globally have experienced some form of digital violence. And if we move from the figures capturing the scale of the phenomenon to those documenting its long-term consequences, the picture gets bleaker and bleaker. You may want to look, for instance, at a recently published inquiry commissioned by *The Economist* (see

References). The research team found that 35 per cent of online abuse victims surveyed internationally had experienced mental health problems, with almost three quarters of them, at some point, worrying about their physical safety. Fear of new aggressions – the study also shows – pushed nine surveyed women out of ten to modify their digital habits and 7 per cent of them to change their job.

Should you need more names and more life stories to bring this data to life, I have more examples. There is British Channel 4 journalist and news presenter Cathy Newman, a regular target of Internet vitriol, who told me the price she pays for the unapologetically feminist stances she takes online is being constantly on guard. ‘I built a career in a male-dominated industry, which has made me resilient. But when digital onslaughts come in waves it is actually scary,’ she said to me when we chatted about her experiences of various social media platforms. Among other instances, Cathy spoke to me of when the attacks peaked following an interview she had done with controversial Canadian academic Jordan Peterson. Channel 4 was forced to call in security experts and more than once she had people shouting at her on the street.

And there is more. There’s the story of British Labour politician Jessica Asato, who in 2015 ran as parliamentary candidate for Norwich North. She told me one of the reasons she had no intention of running again was the barrage of verbal abuse she had to bear during the election campaign.

There’s a Cambridge colleague of mine (who wished to remain anonymous), who found out to her dismay that her feminist publications have made her end up in the Internet trolls’ black book. She is now extremely careful not to share anything online that could direct them towards her kids: no holiday pictures, no posts

that many a mum beaming with pride would write after their child's school play. She is too frightened that among all those who write to her 'Watch yourself' and 'Watch your family', at least a couple may actually mean it.

Then there are the testimonies of the young girls I meet in schools, who cannot even imagine a life without social networks. But when I ask them how old they were when they were first harassed on Instagram or TikTok, they overwhelmingly answer: 'Umm, perhaps I was 11.' And so on and so forth, girl after girl, woman after woman.

Yet the thing is, you are holding this book in your hands. That makes me think that you don't need any further anecdotes to be persuaded of the gravity of the situation, or of the fact that we all stand to lose if online violence turns into a means to silence women and sabotage their careers and lives. I suppose, instead, that you are grappling with a number of questions on what's behind all this. Perhaps you have one main question: *What on earth are digital platforms doing to tackle this tsunami of misogynistic abuse?*

The (not-so-reassuring) answer is below.

* * *

To be entirely fair, I do have at least one reassuring piece of news and that is that many women have no intention of letting themselves be sabotaged and silenced. From the struggles of well-known targets of online harassment to the work of grassroots organisations speaking up for less visible and less wealthy survivors, over the last few years a formidable resistance movement has emerged. Women from all countries and all backgrounds have organised to lobby social media companies and have attracted a great deal of media attention,

securing support from prestigious human rights organisations, as well as from United Nations agencies and sectors of the European Commission.

This is why, predictably enough, social media companies have decided to batten down the hatches. Facebook/Meta, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok have all adopted ad hoc internal guidelines through which they prohibit threats, harassment and hate speech on their platforms. They have also ratified the EU Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech: an initiative that binds them to more effectively remove content undermining the dignity of several at-risk categories; a step advertised with great pomp by their press offices.

But I'm afraid that despite all the promising and the debating, Big Tech's response to the sacrosanct requests of women who expect to feel safe on the Internet has largely stayed the same and this throws under the bus yet another group of women who are invisible on the other side of the screen.

I'd like you to meet one of them, a social media content moderator named Isabella Plunkett. Isabella is about 27 years old and works for Covalen, one of the many contractors to which Facebook/Meta delegates the task of 'cleaning up' its sites and apps. She has much to say about the only actual operational solution platforms have so far adopted against digital violence: the ex-post moderation of what is published online.

Let me explain this as plainly as possible. In practice, every time an abusive comment, like those directed towards Jess Phillips, is uploaded, it is a person like Isabella Plunkett who reviews it and who, potentially, deletes it. To this day, only a part of these operations can be entrusted to automatic moderation software, which is still unable to grasp with sufficient accuracy the complex decisions required

in the evaluation of, at times, very sophisticated text and images. Precisely because human intervention continues to be necessary (and, according to experts, it will long remain so), all the main social media platforms have created positions like Isabella Plunkett's.

During her workday, Isabella looks at about 100 tickets (meaning posts including videos, pictures or text) and has a handful of minutes to decide whether to eliminate them or leave them online. On a daily basis, she skims through a wide range of triggering materials: from paedo-pornographic images, to clips of killings and suicides. As a result of staring at all sorts of horrors she started to have nightmares and needed to take antidepressants. In case you were wondering, we know of Isabella's situation because in spring 2021 she chose to testify to an Irish parliamentary committee on the treatment of online moderators, revealing her name and identity. It was a courageous decision, considering that when hired she had to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA), exposing her to legal retribution if she divulged details of her job, even to family and friends.

'I usually do battle with these things myself; I am the sort of person who feels like they can take on all challenges. But when you're in that position and especially when you sign an NDA saying you can't speak to your friends and family about these things and you're not receiving the appropriate support in work, what are you supposed to do? Are you supposed to sit in the dark? Are you supposed to be alone on these matters?' Isabella said later.

Isabella explained to Irish parliamentarians that she was denied permission to work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite having vulnerable relatives shielding at home. A minority of her colleagues, who were directly employed by Meta, seemed

to have had the opportunity to work remotely, something that increased Isabella's workload, since the most explicit and violent content, usually marked as priority, can only be moderated from office computers.

Another relevant fact to understand Isabella's difficulties is that during the last six years Meta has notably expanded its moderation programme, creating a total of 15,000 new jobs. However, the corporation decided to economise, keeping just a small amount of the moderation work in-house and subcontracting much of it to intermediary companies. To quantify the value of this financial speculation, we only need a couple of rapid calculations. According to a recent appraisal, the median Meta employee earns about \$240,000 annually in salary, bonuses and stock options. Content moderators working for third parties, on the contrary, may earn about \$29,000 dollars, significantly less if hired in other continents (say, in Latvia, Kenya, India or the Philippines, where several subcontractors have relocated their activities). I'll let you make of this information what you will.

'The pay of Facebook staff is more than double mine,' specified Isabella. 'If our work is so important, why are we not Facebook staff? [...] content moderation is Facebook's core business [...] We should not be treated as disposable.' She added that she and her co-workers were 'tired of the second-class citizenship' and that she hoped the committee would 'investigate this practice of outsourcing'.

Meta is in no way the only company to have made the choice to outsource moderation work. Twitter and YouTube, for their part, have long adopted identical tactics. For a while now, both of them have relied on a workforce located in Manila, where, reportedly, staffers may have to review up to 1,000 contents per day, often in

foreign languages, and are subject to restricted toilet breaks. In an attempt to draw foreign investment, Filipino labour laws grant very limited protections to local workers, which in turn enables international corporations to save a great deal of money.

This is, incidentally, one of the reasons why Isabella Plunkett decided to testify publicly. She was aware of the risks she exposed herself to, but she felt she ought to speak up not only for herself, but also on behalf of her co-workers in non-Western countries, who are even more vulnerable than she is. 'I speak out today to make a difference,' she declared very openly. 'The mental health aspect [...] The content that is moderated is awful. It would affect anyone. It has finally started to get to me.' As we shall see, it has started to get to many of her fellow moderators worldwide.

* * *

A couple of years ago a social media page of mine was vandalised with violent pornographic material, which seemed to include young teenagers – children. Due to my line of work, I am rather well prepared for these occurrences (and I know only too well that some women have it even tougher). So I diligently reviewed the safety options of my profile, flagged the posts to the platform and contacted the IT offices of the university where I work and the organisations with which I collaborate to warn them in case the attack was redirected from my page to their own. Then, all of a sudden, an image got stuck in my head. I pictured the woman who, in that exact moment, was processing my notification and presumably had to go through those images before eliminating them. I felt livid with anger, thinking that we were both trapped: the moderator at her

workstation, crunching one ticket after another, and I, undoubtedly more privileged, yet still at the mercy of the misogynistic culture infesting the Web. It is hardly a coincidence that imagining a woman beyond the screen has come so naturally to me.

In truth, there is barely any data disaggregated by gender on the global online moderation workforce. Silicon Valley giants and their intermediaries tend to be very reticent on the specifics of their operations and it is only very recently that a few journalistic inquiries, field studies and revelations of whistle-blowers, like Isabella Plunkett, have begun to throw light on the matter. Still, there are many indications that women moderators face additional hurdles, gender-specific ones.

To start with, the fact that much Internet violence is motivated by gender seems to intensify the emotional weight of the job for female employees. Not for nothing, the first lawsuit for mental health damages ever filed against Facebook was initiated by two women. One of them, American moderator Erin Elder, suffered serious trauma after she had to watch, again and again, a video showing a teen girl being gang-raped by men on a lawn. She asked her manager if she could access any psychological support and was told that her direct employer, a firm called PRO Unlimited, did not offer more than a counselling session every four months, while Facebook did not regard improving that service as part of its remit. Erin's co-plaintiff, Selena Scola, said that she witnessed thousands of acts of extreme and graphic violence 'from her cubicle in Facebook's Silicon Valley offices' and that she developed PTSD 'as a result of constant and unmitigated exposure'.

It is, in fact, a cruel paradox that the women burdened with the task of cleaning up social media develop the very same pathologies

afflicting survivors of online violence. And, sadly, their mental health appears to be anything but a priority for their employers.

Another US moderator named Chloe (pseudonym) revealed to *The Verge* magazine that even during the training phase at the beginning of her employment contract she had started to show the symptoms experienced by many of her colleagues: a sense of impending terror, sudden bursts of sobbing, suffocating anxiety. Her line manager, though, had simply advised her to focus on her breath and not to let herself be too affected by what she watched. According to Chloe, while being kind enough to her, the man had one main objective in mind: he wanted his subordinates to feel well enough to carry on working as ‘Internet cleaners’.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their extremely oppressive working conditions, non-Western women moderators face even stronger repercussions. Just like Isabella Plunkett, many of them are forced to sign harsh confidentiality agreements and they generally speak to journalists or researchers only upon conditions of anonymity. Yet, when they do, their accounts are among the most disturbing of all.

Take that of Maria (pseudonym), a Filipino young woman who dreamed of studying medicine, who was also bound by an NDA. She could still describe in detail a video she had had to stomach years before and which had never stopped haunting her. ‘There’s this lady. Probably in the age of 15 to 18, I don’t know. She looks like a minor. There’s this bald guy putting his head to the lady’s vagina. The lady is blindfolded, handcuffed, screaming, and crying.’ The video was more than 30 minutes long, but Maria started shaking with rage and revulsion after just over a minute. ‘I don’t know if I can forget it. I watched that a long time ago, but it’s like I just watched it yesterday.’

Among the testimonies of other Filipino moderators, there are those of several working mothers who had been forced to watch so many videos of bestiality with children that they would no longer leave their kids alone with babysitters. There are, tragically, cases of suicides within the workforce.

Regardless of their geographical location, we need to account for the dehumanising atmosphere that is said to characterise many moderation offices, which seems to affect female employees more deeply than anyone else. For example, several women employed by specialised moderation contractor Cognizant told the press they had found pubic hair on their desks. Others were sexually harassed by male colleagues, perhaps aroused by the extreme pornography passing by every day on their screens. And so it goes on, a catalogue of endless miseries.

That being said, what should fill us with inspiration is how moderators have so far organised to resist, with their initiatives recently beginning to bear fruit. A number of digital platforms have lately compensated former moderators for health damages and are partnering with their contractors to offer the workforce extra emotional support. Yet the measures introduced so far are still fundamentally inadequate and Isabella Plunkett's story is once again a case in point.

When Isabella's evidence caused a stir internationally, her employer declared that they had introduced '24/7 health support and wellness coaching on site' and that 'this team provides 1:1 counselling support for all employees'.

The downside to this is that the 'wellness teams' did not involve psychologists or psychiatrists, whom people like Isabella would need to consult about the mental health issues they have developed on

the job. The ‘coaches’ Isabella has access to are, instead, much cheaper for the firm and, in her own words, ‘mean really well but they are not doctors.’ They might, for one thing, advise her that spending some time painting or doing karaoke could help her feel a bit better. Yet ‘one does not always feel like singing’ declared Isabella half sarcastically, half exasperatedly. Especially ‘after having seen someone be battered to bits.’

* * *

The lives of women like Jess Phillips and Isabella Plunkett might seem worlds apart, but they are two sides of the same coin: unspeakable online misogyny and the (exploitative) work necessary to cover it up.

Seen together, in my opinion, these stories tell us at least two important things. First, that the digital revolution has paved the way for new, gendered forms of abuse. And second, that when women start protesting, social media companies tend to react by slapping a Band-Aid on whatever aspect of the problem we have all begun to worry about. Never mind if that causes further suffering. It so happens that billion-dollar corporations respond to the demands of women like Jess Phillips, who want to see their rights protected online, by violating the rights of other women, like Isabella Plunkett.

As you may perhaps imagine, some commentators suggest that we cannot have our cake and eat it: to put it bluntly, we must choose between safeguarding the Jesses or the Isabellas of this world. Am I the only one who finds this idea not only ridiculous, but also morally repellent? Not to mention that narratives like *You ladies wanted online safety? Now shut up and deal with moderators getting PTSD* appear in all their dishonesty when we consider that it’s the very business model

of many social media platforms that favour violent online practices (a crucial matter that I will return to).

But there is also a larger point to be made. In my mind, it should come as no surprise that modern digital capitalism compromises the well-being of women, and that it sometimes does so in the name of other women's protection. Far from being a novelty, this dynamic is typical of all previous incarnations of the capitalist logic, intersected as this was, from day one, with the logic of patriarchy.

Here's an obvious yet highly significant example. For centuries, the global economy has relied on the unpaid care labour of women birthing and raising the future workforce. When, throughout history, women strived for economic independence and for gender parity across all professions, fully satisfying their requests would have required a complete overthrow of the economic foundations of society. Among other changes, care activities would have had to be more fairly distributed between genders, and, very possibly, everybody's working hours would have needed reducing, while welfare provisions for families would have needed extending. In fact, the reverse happened. To survive and to keep making money, the system created new and insidious traps for all categories of women and generated further hierarchies to divide them. Newly emancipated female professionals were asked to work extra hours, in the home and outside it. Meanwhile, a part of their care labour was reallocated to less privileged women, often from a migrant and non-white background (think of the many cleaners and carers who have come to populate our cities since more Western, middle-class women have joined the labour market). Divide and conquer is, after all, one of the best proven strategies of all time.

Very clearly, a similar mechanism is at work today, within an

economy redesigned by digital technologies. And the bitter truth is that this vicious circle seems to repeat itself indefinitely. As I write, online abuse survivors like Jess Phillips fight for more stringent regulation of social media platforms. Moderators like Isabella Plunkett – most of them in Western countries, where stronger unions and labour legislation give them more room for manoeuvre – try to force the very same businesses to grant them decent working conditions. Both campaigns deserve our full attention and our staunch support, and both groups are snatching important victories. But there is a risk that the companies may react as they have always done so far: by attending to the most pressing reputational damages, to the detriment of other women with less opportunity to stand up for themselves.

Just to cite one of the most blatant cases: Facebook/Meta has recently invested more than any other tech company in the prevention of online violence in Europe and in English-speaking countries. Allegedly, however, it did not see fit to do the same in the Global South, where it was under less pressure from media, governments and society. Even the compensation the corporation has granted to content moderators suffering health damages has so far predominantly been in the Western labour force. And, in the face of ongoing labour disputes, a likely outcome is the relocation of an even larger proportion of moderation activities to continents with less rigorous labour laws.

So it is up to us to keep our eyes and ears wide open. To support, with no exclusion, the claims of women who have been harmed by the worst sides of digital capitalism and to avoid being deceived by narratives that present the oppression of some of us as a necessary and unavoidable evil.