Vacancy announcement

Institutional Consultancy to Conduct Qualitative Research on the Impact of Social Media Filtering and Moderation Policies on Access to Sexuality Education and Information

Background

In today’s digital age, children and young people are increasingly turning to digital platforms for information concerning sexuality, gender, reproductive health, and relationships. Digital spaces have matured into indispensable and trustworthy resources for young people, providing them with easily accessible and user-friendly information, as well as guidance and support. The role of digital spaces becomes particularly accentuated in regions where alternative sources of comprehensive sexuality education, such as school-, community- or family-based programmes, are scarce or nonexistent.

The provision of inclusive and high-quality sexuality education and awareness within digital spaces transcends mere convenience; it constitutes a fundamental right to information and expression, particularly for young learners. Nevertheless, as dialogue on these themes continues to evolve in digital domains, new challenges arise. Hate speech, cyberbullying, online gender-based violence, and explicit content pose serious risks to young individuals seeking information and engaging in conversations about their identities, health, and relationships.

In response to these challenges, among other measures, social media platforms enact filtering and moderation policies, aiming to ensure user’s safety and safeguard them from harmful content. While these actions are taken to prevent potential risks and curtail adverse practices, they can also inadvertently impede the overall accessibility of sexuality education and availability of evidence- and rights-based sexuality-related content in digital spaces. These measures might inadvertently restrict the inclusivity of these digital realms, marginalize those of diverse sexualities, gender identities and expressions, and erode fundamental rights and freedoms.

UNESCO emphasizes the importance of providing adolescents and young people with safe and accessible online education and information on sexuality. Meanwhile, the enforcement of filtering and moderation policies can lack clarity and consistency. As a result, content designed for educational purposes that addresses sexuality and relationships might be flagged as inappropriate or offensive, even when it is intended solely for educational value and devoid of explicit material.

The implications of such policies extend beyond the mere removal of content. The ramifications may span from the elimination of posts or accounts to curtailing the visibility of specific content or hashtags through shadow banning, thus hindering content monetization and advertising potential. These complex restrictions place digital content creators in a challenging position, requiring them to navigate the nuanced and often opaque boundaries set by social media platforms, often at the risk of unjust punitive actions or outright bans. Consequently, the enforcement of such policies might significantly impact the accessibility and quality of content on sexuality, gender and health within digital spaces, and young individuals are disproportionately affected. The absence of reliable open resources can lead individuals to seek information from less reputable or even harmful sources, including the darker corners of the internet.
In line with the UNESCO Guidelines for the governance of digital platforms, UNESCO plans to conduct an in-depth study of the effects of filtering, moderation, and other platform-driven restrictive practices and policies on access to sexuality education and information on social media. This in-depth mixed-method study investigates how platforms’ restrictions affect content creators and educators, and how these practices impact young people’s access to sexuality education and information on social media.

Scope of work

UNESCO is seeking an institutional consultancy to conduct a qualitative study focused on documenting and analyzing instances of platform restrictions related to sexuality education and information on social media.

Following specific guidance from UNESCO, and in close collaboration with the designated team in the Section of Health and Education, the contractor’s tasks will include:

1. Participate in a virtual kick-off meeting with UNESCO staff to establish the qualitative study’s parameters. This includes selecting interviewees, defining study outreach methods, and setting submission timelines.
2. Liaise with other UNESCO contractors supporting work on digital CSE to ensure alignment between areas of work.
3. Develop a comprehensive study plan, outlining data collection strategies and tools for conducting in-depth interviews with digital sexuality education content creators and educators to:
   a) Investigate the background of restrictive platform-driven practices encountered by content creators.
   b) Identify various forms of restrictive platform-driven practices.
   c) Examine the impact of filtering, moderation, and other restrictive practices and policies on the work, revenues, audience, and psychological well-being of digital content developers and educators.
   d) Map out strategies employed by content creators to navigate and overcome limitations imposed by social media platforms.
   e) Solicit input from content creators on addressing these issues and providing guidance on social media policies.
4. Draft a strategy to enhance engagement with content creators and educators in qualitative research. Consider collaborating with established content developers and civil society organizations to boost research visibility and participation.
5. Conduct online interviews with content developers and educators. Engage a minimum of 80 content developers and educators from diverse geographic regions, ensuring that at least 40 of them are interviewed.
6. Document at least 20-30 instances of platform restrictions related to sexuality education and information. For each case, collect relevant evidence, including:
   a) Verbal or written self-reports, including a description of the issue;
   b) Screenshots or photographs documenting instances of blocking or other restrictive practice, or an explanation of how the restrictive practice was identified;
   c) The name or URL of the social media page;
   d) Information about any attempts made to contact social media appeals bodies directly and any responses received;
   If applicable, provide screenshots of users’ analytics data to illustrate how platform-driven restrictive practices affected the channel/public/resource audience, along with any other pertinent information.
7. Compile a minimum of 12 narratives or interviews based on cases from diverse regions. Verify all details with content developers to ensure accuracy.
8. Summarize the results and analyze findings from the qualitative study.
9. Prepare a preliminary report (up to 40 pages) on filtering, moderation, and other platform –
driven restrictive practices related to sexuality education and information on social media,
including 12 narratives or interviews. Finalize the report content based on the review and
feedback from UNESCO, incorporating data visualizations, infographics, and an associated
PowerPoint summary (up to 20 slides).

Contractor profile

Work experience:

- Proven expertise in multi-country qualitative research, survey development (particularly, in
designing and administering interview protocols, as well as online qualitative research
methods), and stakeholder engagement.
- Familiarity with digital policies, content moderation, and freedom of expression in digital
spaces.
- Desirable background in health and education, with a focus on gender and sexuality, as well as
research in sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Strong report writing skills. Strong report writing skills.

Skills:

- Cultural sensitivity and interpersonal skills for effective communication with diverse
stakeholders.
- Technical proficiency in digital tools for online interviews and data analysis.
- Adherence to ethical research practices and principles.

Educational Background of Contractor’s Team Members:

- Project lead holds a Master's degree in social sciences, gender studies, media policy, media
studies, journalism, or related fields. Ph.D. is advantageous.

Languages:

- Excellent written and oral skills in English are mandatory.
- Proficiency in at least one other official UN language (Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, Spanish)
is an asset.

Timeline:

The consultancy will take place from May to August 2024.

Application process:

Interested teams should submit a cover letter outlining their qualifications and relevant experience, list
of team members and their proposed roles for this project, CV for key team members and at least two
(2) samples of previous research work, as well as a financial proposal to Ms Séverine Pillado at
se.pillado@unesco.org, by 21 April 2024, 23:59 CET. Please indicate "Institutional consultancy
application - qualitative research" in the subject line.

For further information or clarification, please contact Ms. Yulia Plakhutina at
y.plakhutina@unesco.org