Women's Fight for Existence, Respect, and Freedom in Public Space

The web has long become an extension of public space. It is a gigantic, multinational, male-dominated town square. However, women from all around the world are making great contributions to reshaping it into a space of greater inclusivity and freedom.

By promoting and spreading feminist productions and art, they are deconstructing old stereotypes and showcasing new ways of “being a woman,” encouraging their audience to break free of injunctions that limit them. Although online communities can be a place of oppression, cis- and transgender women are successfully using those spaces to advance

feminist emancipation. Some of these women are featured in the pages of this issue. I am so thankful to Nova Ahmed and Elizabeth Churchill, our fantastic guest editors, for having brought together this diverse cast of incredibly inspiring and successful women. I also would like to warmly thank Sainyam

Galhotra, one of our dedicated feature editors at *XRDS*, for leading the making of this issue celebrating women and their achievements.

I want to stress that women's success in a public domain like the web is no small feat. Indeed, both on the way to and once in public space, women will be made to feel that they are not welcome. Especially if they refuse to conform to the few roles men have predefined for them. The devoted mother. The supporting wife. The unambitious, naive, and sexy secretary. The unattractive (and bitter) cat lady. The “cool girl.” Women who claim their independence, show their ambition, set clear boundaries, and request respect will be given a hard time. They will not be listened to; they will be mocked and discredited; they will be attacked—physically, verbally, and psychological-

ly. They will, however, be seen. Looked at, judged on their looks, and reduced to their appearance. Their appearance will be constantly used against them—no matter whether they are considered pretty or not. As a woman, there is a lesson you learn very early: You cannot win. And you will still have to fight every minute, every step of the way.

In a sense, the way women are (mis)treated in public space is more visible on the web than in the physical world. For instance, cyber harassment typically leaves traces. It may be difficult or even impossible to identify the authors of heinous comments, but the written words themselves remain. They can be aggregated, counted. This makes it possible to assess the spread of the harassment. And it's monstrous.

Women on the web are confronted with an environment that constantly

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throws them punches. Objectifies them, sexualizes them, and attempts to diminish them and ridicule their achievements. Those who argue that “biology” is the reason why there aren’t more women in high-power positions should just take a look at the comments posted on any YouTube, Instagram, or Twitch (to name a few) account run by a woman. It doesn’t require a lot of probing to understand that women’s work is responded to in a very different way—a much more negative one—than men’s. There is a systematic prejudice against women’s performance, which leads to their work being the object of a higher degree of dissection and criticism. Women are always very harshly judged. (This is probably because they are seen as a threat by men; since men are told from early on that performing badly is performing “like a girl.” Seeing a woman perform better may constitute a real blow to their self-esteem.) On top of that, many negative comments don’t have anything to do with what these women have put online; they will be sent inappropriate, salacious content and insults just because they are women claiming their share of space in a male-dominated world. I would argue this is what prevents women from reaching top-level positions, or making more money, or simply becoming more successful in whatever career they’ve chosen. While men can go with the flow, women have to go against it.

It is time for us to actively listen to women’s, all women’s, stories. We must make sure their voices are heard and their contributions acknowledged. We must take individual and collective action to create an environment, both off- and online, that treats women with respect and respects their freedom—freedom of movement, of opinion, and of choice. I am convinced that working toward a world that treats women better will lead to improvements for everyone, not only women. Some men may see an increased respect for women and their rights as a threat to their status and privileges, and it is true that they would (will!) lose the power to decide over and shape women’s behavior and life. But they would also secure a greater freedom for themselves, becoming at liberty to nurture and make the most of

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their whole self, including those aspects currently looked down upon as too “feminine.” When we stop devaluing female-coded attributes and request men to turn their back on their femininity to become “real men,” we will have a world in which we all can thrive and men can live up to their full potential. Let’s make it happen.

I want to conclude this EIC letter with a few words of gratitude for my time at *XRDS*. After three years as editor in chief, it is now time for me to step down and hand over to the talented Karan Ahuja. This has been a rich experience for me, and has taught me a lot—about computer science of course, but also about teamwork and leadership. I have been greatly inspired by the *XRDS* team members and guest editors with whom I have had the privilege to collaborate with throughout my tenure. I also feel fortunate to have been able to share my vision of computer science and technology through the issues I have contributed to during this period. I am now looking forward to seeing what new, exciting directions the magazine will take in the next few years.

—Diane Golay

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