Integrating Gender Equality in Artificial Intelligence

The Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men recently published an Opinion on the opportunities and challenges for gender equality in relation to Artificial Intelligence (AI). It is becoming increasingly urgent to discuss and address AI's impact on equality since there is already a widespread use of AI in all spheres of life, and this use is bound to increase. For this reason, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) organised in March the first conference in Malta about AI and its impact on gender equality in spheres such as employment and service-provision. Different stakeholders, including academics, Government authorities, NGOs, employers and workers' unions, participated in this Conference.

Several topics and concerns raised during the Conference are also discussed in the Opinion by Advisory Committee. The Opinion recognises that technological advances such as AI, automation and robotics, are having profound effects on gender equality and women's rights. AI can mirror human biases and even reinforce them, either because biased data is programmed into the algorithm - which is a procedure for solving a mathematical problem - or because biased people create biased algorithms. Additionally, the automation of the decision-making process in AI makes it harder for those impacted by the decisions to understand how these are taken and to identify discrimination.

Besides understanding and addressing these challenges, we should also be aware of the opportunities AI offers for the development of positive algorithms that can identify discrimination or detect harmful online content against women and girls.

The Opinion focuses on the challenges and opportunities posed by AI in five specific areas: education, STEM, recruitment, data, and monitoring and accountability, and puts forwards several recommendations.

The gist of the Advisory Committee's Opinion is that a concern for equality should be integrated in all phases of AI development. Gender impact assessments should be carried out to analyse whether specific groups of women and men are, directly or indirectly, affected during all stages of the algorithmic decision-making. The Advisory Committee also proposes a pro-active way of tackling discrimination, through the use of AI itself, by developing algorithms capable of addressing existing digital gender biases and prejudice.

AI user-friendliness, transparency and non-discriminatory use can be enhanced if diverse groups of citizens participate in its development. However, only 17% of current ICT specialists

in the EU are women. We need to eliminate gender stereotypes in education and take positive action to attract, from a young age, more women to STEM fields and, particularly, to AI.

An important component in the development of AI is the transference of research. A multi-disciplinary approach to AI research - one which incorporates humanities, social sciences, technological studies and gender research - is recommended by the Advisory Committee, since this approach can significantly contribute to preventing gender biases from finding their way into algorithms.

The Advisory Committee highlights the possibility of establishing an AI regulatory framework through auditing and monitoring AI systems and databases for equality, fairness, accountability and robustness. Such mechanism could be complemented by the implementation of a Code of Ethics for the development, application and use of AI to ensure that the principles of a human-centric approach, diversity and human rights are safeguarded throughout. Capacity-building and allocation of resources for stakeholders, including equality bodies, to be better equipped with knowledge and tools that detect and address discrimination in the context of AI is also recommended.

With recruitment being one of the most sensitive areas where AI-related gender biases and discriminatory practices can occur, the Advisory Committee underlines the importance of raising awareness in the HR sector about the use of AI tools, their functioning and potential dangers. Moreover, it is stated that transparency concerning the criteria used in the recruitment process should always be ensured.

Knowingly or unwittingly, we use AI on a daily basis and decisions about our lives are regularly being taken or influenced by machines. In order to avoid exacerbating discrimination across all spheres of society with the spread of AI, we need to be attentive to the impact of AI on equality and develop AI systems that are free from biases and stereotypes. Thus, the NCPE encourages all stakeholders in Malta involved in the development, use and regulation of AI to take note and implement the Advisory Committee's recommendations.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2295 7850 or equality@gov.mt or our Facebook page.