

90^{of} 100**Dr. Paige
Benton**

Here to be Challenging

The power and pain of the social voice.

As South Africa confronts the pervasive crisis of gender-based violence (GBV), public debate often centres on physical safety in offline spaces. However, academic research increasingly highlights how digital environments act as incubators and escalators for real-world gender-based harm.

Addressing this critical intersection is Dr. Paige Benton, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the African Centre for Epistemology and Philosophy of Science (ACEPS) at the University of Johannesburg, and 2026/7 Technology & Human Rights Fellow at the Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights, Harvard Kennedy School. Her work examines how digital platforms shape social and political environments and why online abuse cannot be treated as separate from the broader GBV pandemic.

“UN Women reports that a staggering 95% of online aggressive behaviour and abusive language in South Africa targets women and girls,” says Dr. Benton adding: “Digital misogyny should not be viewed merely as a behavioral issue among individual young men, but as a byproduct of engineered technological environments.”

In her view, engagement-driven recommendation algorithms naturally prioritise provocative content to capture and retain user attention. In online spaces like the “manosphere,” this design can funnel young men, starting from benign content on self-improvement, toward extreme misogynistic material. The real-world impact is evident: an Ipsos and King’s College London study across 30 countries found Gen-Z to have the widest gender divide of any generation on feminism and gender equality. Meanwhile, advancements in generative AI, such as “nudify” software and image-generation tools like Grok, make the automated creation of non-consensual sexualised media increasingly accessible.

For Dr. Benton, understanding this system requires holding technology companies accountable for designing algorithms that amplify misogyny and monetise outrage. While women and girls bear the direct brunt of digital violence, young men are simultaneously navigating information systems engineered to exploit their attention.

Crucially, addressing digital misogyny and broader gender inequality demands a fundamental shift

fundamental shift in representation. She advocates for giving women a far greater voice – not just as public figures or visible experts, but as key decision-makers sitting in the rooms where institutional policies and technological frameworks are developed.

This is where academia can play a critical role in increasing the share of voice. South Africa has made important progress: women now account for roughly half of permanent academic staff nationally. However, representation becomes more complicated when we ask not simply whether women are present, but where power sits within institutions. This means having women in positions where they shape research agendas and institutional decisions. “True representation brings diverse lived experiences into governance, helping shape which social problems are taken seriously and ensuring that institutional responses to GBV address both physical and digital realities,” Dr. Benton concludes.

Your
story
matters

