

## WOMEN AND IMMATERIAL LABOUR: UNVEILING THE UNSEEN DYNAMICS

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This thematic volume of the journal *Topos* sprang from the international conference entitled *Gender and Im/Material Labour*, which was organized by the Center for Gender Studies at the the European Humanities University and held in Vilnius on June 15–16, 2023. The conference was part of the Women in Tech educational and research project, the project was launched by the EHU Center for Gender Studies and is funded by the European Union. Apart of the articles, submitted by the participants of the given conference, the volume also features the outcomes of the Women in Tech research grant program (held in 2022–2023), that was aimed specifically at the young female scholars, whose research has been focused on various gender-related issues of the IT industry in Belarus and in the region in the period of 2020–2023.

This edition of *Topos*, entitled *Gender and Im/Material Labour*, provides a thorough investigation of gender dynamics across various domains, with a specific emphasis on the digital landscape and IT sector. Co-edited by Almira Ousmanova and Antonina Stebur, the journal offers a diverse range of articles that delve into the intricate legal and workplace aspects of gender inequality in IT, along with the transformative influence of women in digital activism and media.

The theme of this journal volume formulated as *Gender and Im/Material Labour* brings into the highlight the intricate relationship between gender, labour, and technology in a contemporary society. It should be noted, that despite the remarkable (in some countries or in some sectors of the IT industry spheres) progress during the recent years, women continue to face bias, unfair treatment and harassment in this sphere, while their work, achievements and overall input often remain invisible, not properly remunerated and consequently not recognized as significant for the development of the entire industry (which, in turn, reinforces the cliché on that IT remains a predominantly men's sphere).

This edition explores the pivotal role of women in intellectual labour and knowledge production in our increasingly digitalised society. At the same time, such areas as service economy and care work are not overlooked either. While being exposed to technological innovations, like any other sector of economy, these jobs are still treated as non prestigious occupations or considered as not “real work” at all, and it is not accidental that women workers prevail in this sector (dev.by, 2023).



But this issue also matters when it comes to the labour performed by women in hi-tech industry, for quite often there is no clear-cut boundary between functional duties and emotional, unpaid labour (in particular, when speaking of managerial work by HR specialists). It should be also noted, that study of gender inequality in high-tech industries calls for the intersectional approach and attention to the gender peculiarities of the precarious work and employment opportunities for women within high-tech sector.

The authors, whose articles are published in this volume, drew on feminist theoretical approaches to the analysis of immaterial labour in a contemporary society. Feminist framework encompasses concepts of care as emotional labour (first established by Arlie Hochschild (1983) in the early 1980s and developed further in the works of Alicia Grandey (2013), Jennifer L Pierce (1995), Ronnie Steinberg (1999), and other gender scholars), cyberfeminism (elaborated by Sadie Plant (1997), Melanie Millar (1998), Donna Haraway (1997) back in the 1990s) and other approaches, that offer a nuanced understanding of these complex issues in diverse contexts. It is essential to recognise the contribution made by Belarusian-American researcher Elena Gapova. Her influential article, “*Wives of ‘Russian’ Programmers or Women Who Follow Men*” (Gapova, 2004), analyses the gendered division of labour and the challenges faced by women in terms of precarious work and dependency in the context of the labour migration of IT specialists from post-Soviet regions to the USA during the early 2000s. Nowadays, repression in Belarus and the Russian-Ukrainian war gave the new forced migration of IT specialists resulting from repression in Belarus and the Russian-Ukrainian war. According to the 2022 dev.io survey, numerous Belarusian IT companies with connections to Western markets have relocated, leaving only 16.7% of firms that did not initiate a move (dev.by, 2023). It leads to re-thinking the concept of “labour division” through the inequalities’ changing dynamics in the IT landscape within the context of modern political shifts. Elena Gapova’s insightful commentary in her article “*Gendering Labour In The Age Of AI*”, which encloses this volume and published as *Afterword* section highlights the historical root causes of gender inequality rooted in the gendered division of labour. The division that classified productive work as masculine and subsistence work as feminine has perpetuated gender disparities, according to the argument presented.

Issues of immaterial labor and gender inequality in high-tech areas attract the attention of researchers from different countries. The problems seem to be common, but the contexts vary significantly. Before presenting the articles included in this issue, it is necessary to make one very important note in regard to the context. All texts included in this thematic volume are related to the analysis of those processes and features that are characteristic of the Eastern European borderland – primarily Belarus and Ukraine. The Women in Tech project was launched in 2021 – at a time when massive political repressions

had already unfolded in Belarus (unleashed by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko after the rigged elections against a variety of social groups who opposed it), but migration, including IT companies and their employees, has not yet become widespread. Meanwhile, the actual start of our project coincided with the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which could not but affect the implementation of this project and the rethinking of its significance, goals, and target groups. When the conference on Gender and Immaterial Labor was taking place in Vilnius in mid-June of 2023, the war in Ukraine had already been going on for more than a year. By that moment the mass migration of Belarusians and the relocation of the most successful Belarusian IT companies had accelerated significantly and acquired a dramatic character. Many women who were forced to leave Belarus (and then, in February 2022, Ukraine, where many Belarusians fleeing political persecution moved after the political crisis in Belarus began in 2020) found themselves in a very vulnerable position: they were faced with the need to change professions and acquire new skills (including survival skills in a new environment), job search, problems of legalization in the country of residence, the need to learn additional languages. And all this against the backdrop of deep emotional turmoil and uncertainty about the future. All these problems, and especially the vulnerability of women in the labor market, also directly affected the IT sector. This is the actual context which is not possible to ignore when reflecting on the situation of gender and immaterial labor in the region as of 2023.

The issues of the political crisis in Belarus (started in 2020) and the full-scaled Russian war in Ukraine (since February 24, 2022) are not directly addressed in the majority of the articles, published in the given volume, however, the dramatic consequences, which were caused by the political repressions in Belarus and the war in Ukraine, followed by the mass migration and consequences for the IT industry are being discussed in some of them.

In the first section of *Topos* journal, *Exploring Gender Inequality in IT: From Legal Frameworks to Workplace Dynamics*, readers are presented with a series of insightful articles addressing the multifaceted aspects of gender dynamics in the IT sector.

Antonina Stebur's article "Gender Dynamics And Colonial Dependencies In The Belarusian IT Sector" examines the complex interplay between colonial dependencies and gender representation in Belarus's IT industry. The article highlights the challenges of achieving gender equality in an environment influenced by outsourcing and historical Soviet policies.

Yana Sanko, in "Just The Right Amount Of Caring: Navigating Contradictory Demands Of HR Work In Belarusian IT", explores the unique tensions experienced by predominantly female HR workers in Belarusian IT companies. The article discusses the emotional labour and care expectations placed on these workers, and how these demands impact their professional roles.

Maryia Zharylouskaya's "Legal Aspects Of Gender Equality In The Labour Market" provides a comprehensive overview of international legal standards for gender equality in the labour market. The article delves into the challenges of implementing these standards and suggests areas for further development in legal frameworks to address gender discrimination.

Lastly, Marina Mentusova's "The Impact Of Women's Fears On Gender Inequality In Belarusian IT" investigates the factors contributing to gender disparity in the Belarusian IT sector. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research, this article reveals the societal stereotypes and structural barriers that hinder women's participation and advancement in IT, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to promote gender equality.

Together, these articles offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and dynamics of gender inequality in the high-tech industry, providing valuable insights for academics, IT-professionals, and policymakers.

The articles, presented in the second section of the *Topos* journal entitled *Innovating Solidarity: Women's Activism in Digital and Media Landscapes*, highlight the significant influence of women in shaping digital activism and media narratives. This noteworthy contribution is discussed in light of geopolitical disruptions and societal changes.

Olena Pavlova, Mariya Rohozha, and Iryna Maslikova investigate the changing media landscape created by Ukrainian women migrants and refugees in Lithuania and Germany following Russia's full-scale invasion. The authors' study contributes significantly to our understanding of the evolving media channels in this context. Their research highlights the community dynamics and underscores the critical role played by women's participation and immaterial labour in establishing support networks in unfamiliar territories. The research applies relational content analysis to texts and accompanying metadata acquired from various communication channels. This approach provides valuable perspectives on the establishment of "networks of networks" and their localization methods in relation to Kant's framework of well-being.

Vera Syrakvash's paper, "In Search for Solidarity: Digital Transformation of Belarusian Feminist Activist Projects", scrutinizes the process of digital transformation in Belarusian feminist activism. This work seeks to investigate the impact of the digital transition on the solidarity among the feminist community in Belarus. Specifically, the study analyses how it affects horizontal networking, as well as practices of care and collective action. This work seeks to investigate the impact of the digital transition on the solidarity among the feminist community in Belarus. Additionally, the paper explores the challenges and opportunities related to feminist solidarity in the digital age. It highlights the distinctive role played by online platforms in nurturing a new generation of Belarusian feminists and disseminating feminist values.

Finally, Natallia Sarakavik delves into the intricate relationship between women's political activism and power dynamics in patriarchal

societies with a particular emphasis on Belarus in her article “*Subjectivity, Power, and Women’s Political Activism in the Digital Society*”. Through the lens of Foucault and Butler’s theories, the paper examines the concrete influence of digital media on women’s political involvement. The author also provides empirical analysis of women’s political activism in Belarus in 2020 and the Women’s Revolution in Iran in 2022. Through this empirical analysis, readers are presented with conclusions regarding the distinct nature of the effectiveness of utilizing digital media in women’s political activism and the reasons for its short-term nature.

This section presents the influence of women’s activism on digital transformation and media narratives, providing significant insights into the changing landscape of feminist solidarity and political engagement in the digital era.

The third section of *Topos* journal, entitled “*Creative Labour Through Gender Optics*”, presents a comprehensive investigation into the nexus of gender, creativity and digital technologies. The section covers a broad range of perspectives on how gender impacts and shapes creative pursuits across numerous domains, such as digital resistance and literature.

Volha Davydzik’s article, “*Pessimism And Optimism Of The Future*” explores how digital technologies can be used for nonviolent resistance. The article focuses on the potential of cyberfeminism theory, stressing its significance in analyzing and reforming information technologies as tools for empowerment and transformation.

Tania Arcimovich, in “*Trajectories Of Displacement: (Non)Written And Lost Biographies*”, investigates the stories of female artists who were marginalized and connected to the Belarusian cultural space during the first half of the 20th century. The paper examines the universal patterns of marginalization in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as art, science, and technology. The text highlights the feminist approach to storytelling to challenge the male-oriented canon in art history, intending to create a more diverse and inclusive epistemic space.

Kseniya Shtalenkova’s article titled “*Women’s Writing As Immaterial Labour: The Legality Of Choosing A Plot In The Years Of Crisis*” analyses women’s writing in contemporary Belarusian literature as a form of immaterial labour. The paper explores the exact conditions and challenges encountered by female authors in Belarus from the ‘90s to the 2020s. It delves into the development of female portrayal in literature, the consequences of language selections, chances for publication, and the themes that prevail in women’s writing in the present-day socio-political environment.

These articles in the third section of the journal offer valuable insights into how gender perspectives can significantly influence the creative process, digital activism, and historical narratives. The reflections provide critical contributions to the discourse on gender and creative labour.

In conclusion, this edition of *Topos*, centred around *Gender and*

*Im/Material Labour*, offers a comprehensive examination of the intricate issues regarding gender roles in modern society, specifically in areas encompassing technology, activism, and creative industries. This issue features a diverse selection of articles, ranging from Yana Sanko's analysis of the IT sector in Belarus to Elena Gapovas's study on how artificial intelligence affects the gendered division of labour. The authors showcase pioneering methods for resistance and solidarity, both online and via artistic channels. The journal's findings not only enhance our understanding of the complex interrelationship between gender and labour in diverse manifestations but also illuminate routes towards more fair and all-encompassing approaches.

As editors, we hope this collection of research and viewpoints will stimulate further discussion, action, and progress in the continual quest for gender equality across all aspects of existence.

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