

# Responsible Design Through Care: A Relational Framework for Gendered Harm

Fernando Miramontes Forattini<sup>1</sup>

Marie Curie Postdoctoral Researcher at Dublin City University, Lero Research Ireland,

[fernando.forattini@dcu.ie](mailto:fernando.forattini@dcu.ie)

**Abstract:** Gender-based harm online is often addressed through individualised safety tools, content moderation mechanisms, or compliance-driven governance, with responsibility framed through abstract ethical principles and narrow performance metrics. This position statement argues that such approaches insufficiently account for the institutional relationships, dependency conditions, and accountability gaps through which harm is produced, normalised, and left unresolved. Building on an integrated body of work that includes several peer-reviewed articles and editorials, this paper draws on a structured review of 308 technology design studies (2010–2023) showing the dominance of utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-ethical framings, alongside focus group research with 110 marginalised women in Brazil navigating high-stakes digital services under conditions of institutional mistrust, harm and power asymmetry. Together, these studies motivate care ethics as a foundational design and governance orientation for developing sociotechnical imaginaries of responsibility. For the workshop, this position statement contributes a conceptually grounded and empirically informed account of why prevailing “responsible design” ethics in HCI and IS often fail women in practice, and what a care-ethical alternative makes possible. It offers: (1) a systematic critique of dominant ethical framings that disembed design from social and institutional structures; (2) a relational, care-ethical framework with implications for trust, empowerment, and engagement; (3) an empirically grounded care chain model linking design to organisational response; and (4) actionable pathways and prompts to support collective reflection on responsible, gender-aware sociotechnical design.

**Keywords:** care ethics, responsible design, gender-based harm, institutional accountability, participatory design.

## 1 MOTIVATION: WHY IMAGINARIES OF “RESPONSIBILITY” MUST INCLUDE INSTITUTIONS

Technology is frequently framed as a vehicle for progress and empowerment. Yet for many women, particularly those in marginalised positions, digital systems intended to promote safety and access are experienced as fragile, untrustworthy, or misaligned with lived realities. My research shows that these encounters are not primarily shaped by interface design alone, but by how users anticipate institutional response, credibility, and consequence. In this sense, digital systems are interpreted less as neutral tools than as extensions of organisational power and historical patterns of neglect.

This disjuncture points to a broader problem in dominant imaginaries of responsibility. Digital safety is often framed as a matter of individual protection, technical features, or procedural compliance, while the institutional conditions that enable or constrain meaningful response remain implicit or invisible. As a result, responsibility is treated as a property of systems or users, rather than as a distributed and relational practice enacted across platforms, organisations, and governance structures. This paper therefore argues that sociotechnical imaginaries of responsible design must explicitly incorporate institutional capacity, power asymmetries, and accountability relationships, and that care ethics provides a critical framework for articulating and redesigning these conditions.

---

<sup>1</sup> This publication has emanated from research jointly funded by Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland under Grant Number 13/RC/2094\_2, and co-funded by the European Union under the Systems, Methods, Context (SyMeCo) programme Grant Agreement Number 101081459. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

## **2 THE LIMITS OF DOMINANT ETHICAL APPROACHES IN TECHNOLOGY DESIGN**

Mainstream approaches to “responsible design” in IS and HCI remain anchored in utilitarian, deontological, and virtue-ethical traditions. These frameworks are not inherently misguided, but they routinely abstract technology from the organisational and political conditions in which harm is produced and addressed. The result is a thin account of responsibility: responsibility becomes a property of features, policies, or individual behaviour, rather than a distributed institutional practice shaped by power, dependency, and response capacity.

Utilitarian framings prioritise aggregate benefits such as efficiency and scale, which can render concentrated harms acceptable when they are difficult to quantify, costly to mitigate, or borne by marginalised groups. Deontological framings translate responsibility into rights, rules, and procedural safeguards, yet often under-specify how to act under conditions that structure gendered harm: fear of retaliation, constrained disclosure, evidentiary asymmetries, and the need for flexible, dignity-preserving alternatives. Virtue-ethical framings shift attention to character and conduct, in a discretionary, often male-centric westernized perception of what constitutes “virtue”, but can individualise responsibility and reproduce culturally narrow, often implicitly gendered assumptions about what “good” behaviour looks like, while leaving platform incentives and organisational routines largely unexamined.

## **3 CARE ETHICS AS A RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSIBLE DESIGN**

Care ethics begins from a different premise: human life is constituted by interdependence, and responsibility is realised through relationships, institutional practices, and material arrangements rather than abstract principles alone. Applied to responsible design, this reframes the unit of analysis from isolated users and features to relational systems shaped by power, dependency, and context. The central question becomes not only whether a system complies with rules or optimises outcomes, but whether it sustains conditions of attentive recognition, competent response, and meaningful recourse for those who are harmed. Responsibility is thus evaluated across care relations and accountability chains, including the organisational capacities and governance structures that determine whether safety claims are credible in practice.

A care-ethical approach is structurally aware and context-dependent. It treats vulnerability and dependency as design baselines rather than exceptions; accounts for socially patterned exposure and constraint shaped by race, class, age, and education; interprets avoidance, withdrawal, and workarounds as signals of institutional failure; and distributes responsibility across actors and layers, aligning interfaces with escalation pathways, and governance mechanisms.

This relational imaginary also reshapes evaluation. Rather than privileging engagement metrics, it traces trustworthy trajectories across the full pathway of support, asking whether people experience respect, protection, and follow-through. It shifts from universal solutions to contextual support, from designing for to designing with, and from individual responsibility to shared accountability, translating everyday practices of care into dignity-preserving design pathways.

## **4 CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORKSHOP**

This position statement contributes a conceptually grounded and empirically informed perspective on why prevailing ethical models of responsible design often fail to address gender-based harm in practice, and how care ethics can reorient sociotechnical imaginaries toward relational accountability and institutional response. It offers a framework that connects ethical critique, design practice, and governance conditions, and invites collective reflection on how responsibility can be redistributed across systems rather than placed on those who are harmed.

Within the workshop, I aim to contribute to discussions on:

- how care-ethical principles can be translated into concrete design decisions;
- how evaluation methods can capture trust, dignity, recourse, and breakdown points, rather than engagement alone; and
- how participatory design can centre marginalised voices without tokenisation, while explicitly managing risk, confidentiality, and institutional power.

Together, these discussions seek to advance sociotechnical imaginaries in which digital systems are not only compliant or efficient, but capable of sustaining meaningful care, accountability, and protection in contexts of gender-based harm.

## 5 REFERENCES

- Forattini, F. (2025). *Gender-focused technology design and care ethics integration: Addressing social and practical challenges*. In *Proceedings of the 58th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 6794–6803). <https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2025.810>
- Forattini, F., & Connolly, R. (2026). *From design to policy: Embedding care ethics and STEM institutional insights in gender-focused technology* (manuscript under review). *ACM SIGMIS Database: The DATABASE for Advances in Information Systems*.
- Forattini, F. M., Connolly, R., & Joshi, K. D. (2025). *Breaking boundaries: Advancing gender and technology research to combat sextortion*. *ACM SIGMIS Database: The DATABASE for Advances in Information Systems*, 56(1), 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3715966.3715968>