

Question of Workplace Surveillance

Background

Digital technologies without a doubt bring enormous benefits to societies in many different areas. They can advance human progress and even assist in promoting and protecting human rights. But unfortunately in the last few years, people's privacy has come under great pressure because of modern technology, which makes surveillance and control in the workplace a possibility, or even an everyday experience for many. While they have been initially developed to combat crime, intrusive hacking tools, also known as spyware, can be easily abused by authorities.

This includes the workers' everyday lives being tracked and spied on via their electronic devices. New technologies have also enabled the systematic monitoring of what people are saying online, such as collecting and analyzing social media posts. The privacy of workers can also be disturbed by different types of software, like extensive biometric databases and digitalized identity systems, especially if they are large-scale and/or the workers' biometric information is being collected and analyzed.

Because of this, it is essential that any technologies, which could be used for work surveillance, are regulated based on international human rights law. There are urgent steps that need to be taken in order to address the spread of spyware and to make sure the workers' privacy, as well as their basic human rights, are being protected. Constant surveillance of workers can certainly undermine those rights.

Possible solutions

Governments often fail to adequately inform the public about their surveillance activities. Even when surveillance tools are initially used for legitimate reasons, such as prevention of criminal activity, they can easily be used for a very different purpose for which they were not initially intended. The introduction of new laws, which would ensure a greater transparency, as well as holding accountability from the side of the governments, would be highly smiled upon. Any safeguards which could ensure better protection of privacy are needed. In some cases it may be necessary to impose outright bans on technology that cannot meet the standards enshrined in international human rights legal frameworks.

The right to privacy of every working person is at a huge risk, which is why action is urgently needed to be taken. This action should be in correspondence to the protection of fundamental human rights.

Questions to consider

1. What is your country's position on workplace surveillance?
2. What are past actions that your country has taken regarding workplace surveillance?
3. Does your country believe that workplace surveillance should be a norm?
4. What action has the United Nations taken
5. What are the pros and cons of workplace surveillance?
6. How consistent is your country in handling workplace surveillance? Are there different laws in different parts of the country?
7. Are there any NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that can assist your country's position?
8. What are the impacts of widespread digital monitoring in the workplace?

Resources

- <https://www.ohchr.org/en/privacy-in-the-digital-age>
- <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/09/spyware-and-surveillance-threats-privacy-and-human-rights-growing-un-report>
- <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/442/29/PDF/G2244229.pdf?OpenElement>
- <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/12/malta-un-expert-recommends-broad-changes-surveillance-laws>