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Gender and its Digital Discontents: Decolonial Perspectives from the Global South

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Abstract

In the age of digital modernity, the internet and its associated technologies are often heralded as tools of empowerment, connectivity, and freedom. Yet, these same technologies also reproduce historical hierarchies, exclusions, and violence. In particular, gendered experiences in digital spaces reveal how colonial legacies persist in new technological forms. This paper explores the multifaceted intersections of gender, digital technology, and decolonial thought from the vantage point of the Global South. While mainstream discourses on gender and digitalization often emerge from Euro-American paradigms, this study critiques the coloniality embedded in digital infrastructures and gendered online experiences. Drawing upon postcolonial, feminist, and decolonial frameworks, the research interrogates how digital spaces reinforce, disrupt, or reimagine gender hierarchies, especially in formerly colonized societies. This paper argues that a decolonial analysis of gender and digital technology is imperative to understand and counteract the structures of power that govern digital interactions, representations, and access in the Global South.

Keywords: Gender, Digital Technology, Global South, Colonization, Decolonization.

Introduction

This research draws on a synthesis of decolonial theory, postcolonial feminism, and digital cultural studies to critically assess the digital gendered experiences of the Global South. These frameworks serve to unpack how colonial legacies persist in contemporary digital environments, particularly in the modes of knowledge production, structures of surveillance, and the representation or erasure of marginalized gendered identities. Decolonial theory, as developed by thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano, offers a foundational critique of the modernity/coloniality matrix. Quijano's concept of coloniality of power describes how colonial logics of domination did not end with formal decolonization but have instead been embedded into global structures of knowledge and power, including technology (Quijano 533–580). Mignolo expands this by introducing the notion of epistemic disobedience and delinking, urging intellectuals to sever ties with Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize other ways of knowing (Mignolo 449–514). These perspectives enable an interrogation of how digital spaces are constructed through colonial ontologies that normalize whiteness, Western rationality, and patriarchal heteronormativity.

In parallel, postcolonial feminism addresses the epistemic violence that arises from the universalization of Western feminist thought. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have highlighted how the figure of the "Third World woman" is often homogenized and stripped of agency within dominant feminist discourses (Spivak 271–313; Mohanty 17–42). Spivak's seminal question—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—remains critical in digital contexts where algorithmic structures may silence or misrepresent subaltern voices. Mohanty, meanwhile, critiques Western feminist scholarship for imposing analytical categories that overlook local histories, struggles, and resistances (Mohanty 42). Applying these frameworks to the digital realm reveals the continuities of epistemic subjugation in gendered online representations and global feminist alliances that often exclude voices from the Global South.

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Finally, digital cultural studies, as exemplified by scholars like Safiya Umoja Noble and Ruha Benjamin, provide tools to understand the racialized and gendered dimensions of algorithmic design and data practices. Noble's concept of algorithmic oppression demonstrates how search engines reflect and reinforce social biases, often marginalizing women of color through the logic of commodification and surveillance (Noble 1–24). Benjamin's notion of the New Jim Code reveals how ostensibly neutral technologies can automate and entrench forms of racial and gendered discrimination (Benjamin 9–33). These insights are especially pertinent in understanding how digital platforms replicate colonial hierarchies while appearing to be liberatory or democratic.

Together, these theoretical lenses reveal that digital spaces are not neutral or postcolonial, but rather active sites of colonial continuities. The integration of decolonial theory, postcolonial feminism, and digital cultural critique facilitates a nuanced understanding of how gendered experiences in the Global South are shaped by—and in resistance to—digital colonialities.

Coloniality and the Digital

The commonly held perception of the internet as a borderless and neutral space masks the deep-rooted colonial logics that structure its infrastructure, governance, and epistemology. Far from being egalitarian, the digital sphere is shaped by historical asymmetries of power—reflecting what Aníbal Quijano terms the coloniality of power, a structure that persists even after the end of formal colonial rule, operating through global capitalism, knowledge systems, and cultural domination (Quijano 533–580).

One of the clearest manifestations of digital coloniality is the linguistic hierarchy entrenched in the internet's architecture. English dominates over 60% of web content, despite being the native language of less than 10% of the world's population (Pimienta et al.). This dominance marginalizes non-Western languages and knowledge systems, leading to epistemic erasure. Walter Mignolo argues that such epistemic violence is central to modernity/coloniality, where Western languages and rationalities are positioned as universal and normative (Mignolo 449–514). Consequently, users from the Global South are not only consuming content shaped by Western ideals but are also constrained in their ability to produce and circulate indigenous knowledge online.

Further, platform capitalism is dominated by a handful of corporations headquartered in the Global North—such as Meta (Facebook), Google, and Amazon—that extract data from users globally, particularly in under-regulated markets in the Global South. Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias describe this as "data colonialism," wherein human life is appropriated and commodified through datafication, echoing the extractive logics of historical colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 337–353). For example, Facebook's Free Basics initiative in India and several African countries, while marketed as a philanthropic act to "connect the unconnected," was critiqued as a form of digital enclosure that favored Facebook's own platforms and surveilled user behavior (Gurumurthy and Bharthur 12–14).

These extractive and hierarchical digital structures have gendered dimensions. Surveillance algorithms often target and penalize bodies marked as female, queer, or non-normative. Ruha Benjamin's concept of the New Jim Code illustrates how technology, under the guise of neutrality, amplifies existing biases (Benjamin 9–33). For example, content moderation algorithms disproportionately censor Black, queer, and feminist activists, while allowing hate speech and misogyny to proliferate (Noble 88–92). This reproduces a digital coloniality of gender, where marginalized identities are subjected to hyper-visibility, misrepresentation, or erasure.

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Moreover, digital labor in the Global South, such as click farms, content moderation, and data labeling, reflects a new division of labor reminiscent of colonial servitude. These tasks, often invisible and poorly paid, are disproportionately performed by women and minorities in countries like India, the Philippines, and Kenya. Paola Ricaurte notes that this labor is essential for training AI systems, yet it remains unrecognized and precarious, reinforcing North-South dependency (Ricaurte 36–38).

In sum, the digital sphere is not postcolonial but rather a site of renewed colonial incursions, masked by the rhetoric of innovation and connectivity. It reproduces not only economic dependencies but also epistemic and gendered hierarchies, making a decolonial digital politics essential for justice and equity in the Global South.

Gendered Experiences Online

While the digital realm is often touted as a democratizing space that facilitates free expression and access to knowledge, it remains deeply entangled with the patriarchal, racialized, and heteronormative power structures that govern offline realities. For women, queer individuals, and other marginalized gender identities in the Global South, digital engagement is marked by hyper-visibility, precarity, and systemic erasure, as well as by acts of resistance and community formation.

A key concern is the disproportionate exposure to online harassment and violence. In India, for instance, feminist journalists and activists such as Rana Ayyub and Barkha Dutt have been subjected to coordinated campaigns of doxxing, rape threats, and cyberbullying, often targeting their gender and religious identity (Chakraborty and Bose 5–7). Such digital violence is not random; it reflects a socio-political climate where dissenting female voices are policed and delegitimized. According to the Internet Democracy Project, gendered online abuse often works to silence women from marginalized caste and religious backgrounds, compounding existing offline exclusions (Gurumurthy and Chami 11–14).

Yet, digital spaces have also become sites of feminist contestation and solidarity. The rise of online feminist movements in India, such as #PinjraTod (Break the Cage) and #MeTooIndia, illustrates how young women mobilize digital tools to challenge patriarchal institutions and demand accountability. #PinjraTod began as a response to restrictive hostel rules imposed on female students in Indian universities, evolving into a broader critique of gender-based surveillance and control (Chaudhuri 144–146). These campaigns use Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp as platforms for collective voice and action, bypassing mainstream media and creating alternative archives of resistance.

In Latin America, cyberfeminism has emerged as a potent intersection of digital activism, art, and theory. Groups like “CiberfeministasGT” in Guatemala and “Ni Una Menos” in Argentina utilize digital media not only to document gender-based violence but also to reimagine feminist futures through participatory storytelling, encryption workshops, and meme-based advocacy (Barranquero and Sáez 113–115). Latin American cyberfeminists challenge not only local patriarchies but also the colonial and capitalist underpinnings of digital infrastructure, aligning their praxis with decolonial feminist thought (Gago 29–30).

In Africa, LGBTQ+ activists face unique risks due to both state-sanctioned homophobia and platform censorship. For example, in Uganda and Nigeria, where same-sex relationships are criminalized, online anonymity and encrypted communication become crucial tools for survival and community-building (Ekine 45–48). However, major platforms like Facebook and TikTok have been criticized for shadowbanning queer content, labeling it as "sensitive" or inappropriate, thereby reinforcing invisibility (Mwaura and Kabwe 91–

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94). Despite this, networks like Kuchu Times in Uganda or The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs) in Nigeria have created safe digital ecosystems for advocacy, education, and mutual aid.

These case studies reveal that gendered digital experiences in the Global South are not merely shaped by risk but also by radical forms of resilience. While platform algorithms and online cultures often reproduce existing systems of domination, they also provide tools for counter-publics, intersectional solidarities, and subaltern articulations. As Nikita Dhawan asserts, "emancipatory digital politics must account for the uneven distribution of vulnerabilities and privileges" (Dhawan 57). The challenge, then, is to critically navigate these spaces, leveraging their potential for transformative engagement while resisting their co-optation by hegemonic power.

Digital Feminism and Decolonial Praxis

The proliferation of digital platforms has expanded the horizons of feminist activism, enabling transnational solidarity, real-time mobilization, and the reclamation of public discourse. However, this expansion also necessitates a critical interrogation of what constitutes feminist engagement in the digital age, particularly when situated within the context of colonial histories, racial capitalism, and epistemic violence. A decolonial digital feminism challenges Western-centric narratives of progress and universality, emphasizing technological sovereignty, narrative agency, and cultural specificity rooted in the lived realities of women and gender minorities in the Global South.

In Southern Africa, the initiative #MosadiDigital ("Mosadi" meaning "woman" in Setswana and Sesotho) exemplifies a decolonial digital feminist praxis that foregrounds African women's experiences and epistemologies. Launched by digital activists and scholars in Botswana, Lesotho, and South Africa, the campaign addresses issues of online misogyny, gender-based violence, and technological exclusion by framing them within African feminist traditions (Mokwena and Dlamini 212–215). Rather than adopting Western paradigms of digital literacy or empowerment, #MosadiDigital insists on context-specific approaches that draw from indigenous knowledge systems and community-based forms of resilience. It advocates for inclusive technological design, data justice, and digital access that reflect the needs of African women, thereby challenging both Silicon Valley techno-solutionism and NGO-driven feminism.

In India, Dalit digital activism has emerged as a powerful counter-narrative to both caste and gender oppression. Movements such as Dalit Camera, The Blue Dawn, and Velivada utilize digital media to amplify subaltern voices historically excluded from mainstream discourse. These platforms resist Brahminical patriarchy by documenting caste-based atrocities, celebrating Dalit women's achievements, and asserting a counter-public sphere rooted in Ambedkarite thought (Soundararajan 71–73). As Thenmozhi Soundararajan argues, Dalit digital praxis is not merely representational; it is epistemological resistance that challenges dominant ways of knowing and curates digital archives of pain, survival, and resistance (Soundararajan 75). Dalit feminists, in particular, disrupt the hegemonic narrative of Indian digital feminism, which often centers upper-caste urban women, by foregrounding intersectional critiques that account for caste, class, and location.

In Latin America, Indigenous women's digital storytelling initiatives are forging new epistemic frontiers by decolonizing both form and content. Projects such as "Mujeres Tejiendo Saberes" (Women Weaving Knowledges) and "Territorio de Saberes" (Territory of Knowledges) from Colombia and Mexico integrate traditional oral histories with digital media to assert cultural autonomy and knowledge sovereignty (Martínez and López 88–91). These initiatives do not merely use technology as a tool but reconfigure it as a space for ceremonial, ecological, and communal expression. In these projects, storytelling is not only about

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narrative but also about spatial reclaiming, as platforms become extensions of ancestral territory, resisting extractivist and patriarchal logics.

Crucially, these movements emphasize technological sovereignty—the right to control the tools and infrastructures that mediate one's reality. As Paola Ricaurte notes, decolonial feminist digital activism seeks not only freedom from surveillance and exclusion but also the capacity to design technologies grounded in feminist and indigenous worldviews (Ricaurte 356–359). This approach critiques the techno-determinism of dominant digital cultures and reimagines digitality through communal, situated, and relational ontologies.

Thus, digital feminism in the Global South is not merely about access or representation; it is a praxis of refusal and reinvention. By contesting the colonial legacies embedded in digital infrastructures, these movements articulate alternative feminisms that are decolonial, intersectional, and epistemically plural. They affirm the possibility of a feminist digital future that is not only inclusive but also reparative—one that restores voice, place, and memory to those long silenced.

Challenges and Ethical Concerns

The promise of decolonizing digital gender politics is often fraught with complex ethical dilemmas that emerge from the structural inequities embedded in both digital technologies and feminist interventions themselves. As feminist actors, scholars, and organizations engage in digital activism, research, and policy advocacy across the Global South, they must contend with questions of representation, surveillance, technological imperialism, and epistemic violence. Far from being neutral tools, digital technologies are enmeshed in colonial-capitalist frameworks that may reproduce the very inequalities they aim to dismantle.

One major challenge lies in digital access and infrastructural inequality. While feminist digital movements seek to be inclusive, large swathes of rural, indigenous, and economically disadvantaged populations—particularly women—remain excluded from meaningful access to digital resources. As noted by Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami, digital inclusion efforts often focus on access to devices or connectivity, without addressing the sociocultural and gendered dimensions of digital exclusion, such as patriarchal gatekeeping, language barriers, or caste-based discrimination (Gurumurthy and Chami 18–21). Feminist interventions that ignore these dimensions risk perpetuating techno-determinism—the assumption that access alone leads to empowerment.

Another critical concern is the representation and framing of marginalized identities. Feminist digital activism must grapple with the ethical use of imagery, testimony, and data, especially when engaging with communities that have been historically objectified or fetishized by colonial knowledge systems. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasizes in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, well-intentioned research can still inflict harm when it reproduces extractive logics or aestheticizes suffering for external consumption (Smith 89–92). Ethical feminist practice in digital contexts, therefore, demands informed consent, contextual sensitivity, and reciprocal engagement—principles that are often difficult to uphold in viral, high-speed media environments.

The issue of surveillance and data colonialism poses yet another ethical dilemma. As digital activism expands, feminist collectives and marginalized groups are increasingly subjected to state and corporate surveillance, often under the guise of national security, content moderation, or platform regulation. In many Global South contexts, such as Egypt, Nigeria, and the Philippines, feminist and queer activists have been arrested or harassed based on their digital activities (Qureshi 112–114). Moreover, tech platforms headquartered in the Global North routinely extract, commodify, and monetize user data from the South, often without adequate transparency or accountability (Couldry and Mejias 342–344). This asymmetrical power

relation, described by Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias as "data colonialism," mirrors the extractive mechanisms of historical colonialism—only now in the realm of metadata and algorithms.

Furthermore, feminist research and policy-making efforts in the Global South sometimes risk replicating colonial frameworks by privileging Western feminist theories or external donor agendas. For instance, digital literacy programs funded by international organizations may fail to account for local epistemologies, languages, or feminist traditions, thereby imposing a form of epistemic violence under the banner of development (Bhattacharya 102). In this context, reflexivity and intersectionality are not merely academic tropes but ethical imperatives. As Kim TallBear notes in her critique of digital indigeneity, ethical engagement requires an acknowledgment of researcher positionality, community autonomy, and Indigenous relational ethics (TallBear 47–49).

A decolonial ethics of feminist digital praxis therefore must include: grounded engagement with local knowledge systems, collective consent and digital safety, resistance to extractive and representational violence, and long-term solidarity beyond moments of crisis or visibility.

Ultimately, decolonizing digital gender politics is not a fixed goal but an ongoing process of ethical becoming, grounded in humility, accountability, and attentiveness to context-specific struggles and solidarities. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, "ethical practice is about living with discomfort, about learning to hear what you do not want to hear" (Ahmed 134). Feminist digital work in the Global South must, therefore, remain vigilant against the seductions of saviorism, technocracy, and epistemic erasure—even in its own ranks.

Conclusion:

The digital realm, far from being a neutral or purely technological domain, is a deeply political and cultural space embedded within global histories of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. As digital infrastructures and platforms increasingly mediate everyday life, particularly in the Global South, it becomes imperative to recognize how power, knowledge, and identity are constructed, contested, and often commodified within digital ecosystems. Through a decolonial feminist lens, this research has sought to uncover how digital technologies are not only sites of possibility and connection but also of surveillance, erasure, and epistemic domination.

The intersection of gender and digitality in postcolonial and neocolonial contexts reveals how coloniality continues to operate through data hierarchies, platform governance, and algorithmic biases that disproportionately affect women, queer individuals, and marginalized gender communities (Ricaurte 354; Gurumurthy and Chami 22). These dynamics expose the continuities between historical modes of control and contemporary forms of digital governance. For example, data colonialism, as theorized by Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias, highlights how the extraction of data from users in the Global South replicates earlier imperialist patterns of resource exploitation (Couldry and Mejias 338–340).

Yet, the same digital spaces also offer opportunities for resistance, re-imagination, and collective transformation. Initiatives such as Dalit digital platforms in India, #MosadiDigital in Southern Africa, and Indigenous digital storytelling projects in Latin America embody a form of decolonial digital feminism that not only contests gendered oppression but also reclaims technological and narrative sovereignty (Soundararajan 75; Mokwena and Dlamini 215; Martínez and López 91). These movements articulate a feminism that is intersectional, situated, and radically inclusive—one that foregrounds local knowledge systems, reasserts epistemic agency, and builds transnational solidarities beyond Western paradigms.

Moreover, the ethical challenges of digital feminist engagement—ranging from data privacy and surveillance to representation and community consent—compel scholars, activists, and policymakers to embrace reflexivity, accountability, and contextual sensitivity in their work. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasizes, decolonial engagement must begin with the recognition that knowledge itself is never innocent—it is situated, relational, and political (Smith 89).

In sum, this research has argued that to engage with gender in digital contexts is also to confront the colonial residues of our digital futures. Decolonizing digital gender politics means dismantling not only technological and structural inequalities but also epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain ways of knowing while marginalizing others. It calls for a pluralistic digital ethic grounded in care, justice, and mutual recognition. By centering the lived experiences, resistance strategies, and intellectual contributions of the Global South, this paper contributes to the ongoing project of building a more equitable, inclusive, and decolonial digital future—one in which technology serves as a tool for liberation rather than domination.

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