



Towards a Feminist Digital Justice Vision: Issue Mapping of Critical Considerations

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Working Group on Feminist Principles for Digital Justice, co-convened by DAWN and IT for Change



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Introduction

From the [Cyborg Manifesto](#) to the more recent [Feminist Principles of the Internet](#), there is a long tradition of feminist scholarship and practice exploring the potential of the internet and new digital technologies for gender transformation. The internet's affordances of horizontal peer-to-peer networking and decentralized communication have been seen as holding the key to new forms of emancipatory individuation, trans-local solidarity-building, and the rise of democratic cultures that transcend the warty boundaries between the public and private spheres, overcoming [traditional patriarchal controls on women's political participation](#).

Unfortunately, the subsumption of the digital revolution into the logic of capital accumulation has thwarted this dream. The public squares of the internet's digital agoras have been privatized and carved up into [walled gardens](#) of social media platforms. The platform business model – based on monopolistic control of network infrastructures that aid interactions between different social groups, and ceaselessly mine data from such interactions to consolidate economic and political power – has now percolated into [every sphere](#) of social and economic activity, enabling the capitalist expropriation of material and intangible knowledge commons on a hitherto unprecedented scale.

The pandemic made even more unmistakably clear that we are in the thick of a multidimensional crisis, where the socio-economic, political, and ethical structures of the 20th century have been rendered ineffectual by the excesses of [digital capitalism](#).

Against this backdrop, between August 2021 and December 2022, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and IT for Change convened the Working Group on Feminist Digital Justice – a dialogic space that brought together 36 feminist scholar-practitioners from the Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America to explore multiple perspectives on the digital paradigm as refracted through the prism of global South feminisms. The aim of the Working Group was to interrogate the crisis we find

ourselves in, delineating the multiple challenges confronting us, and evolving a new vision of feminist digital justice commensurate with the contemporary moment.

Through periodic meetings, the Working Group reflected on two central questions:

- a) How can we halt data extractivism and reclaim the emancipatory promise of digital and data technologies for the gender justice agenda?
- b) What is the vision of feminist digital justice that we seek to outline?

The insights from these discussions were synthesized by the IT for Change and DAWN teams into two outputs – background paper of critical considerations for gender justice in the digital paradigm and a Declaration on Feminist Digital Justice.

To start with, this background paper takes stock of the dominant digital paradigm from a critical feminist perspective, teasing out various dimensions of gender injustice in the institutional order of data capitalism: bodies and social relationality becoming fodder for data capitalism, gendered labor exploitation and exclusions in platform-controlled value chains, gender bias and discrimination in frontier tech development, ecological crisis, and gendered exclusions from the digital welfare state. Against this backdrop, it envisions new horizons for feminist political organizing and offers the following specific proposals:

- Take back the public internet agora from privatized platforms
- Respond to women's human rights violations in all spheres of datafied sociality
- Always adopt an intersectional approach
- Appropriate the internet and frontier technologies for feminist economies
- Decolonize data governance debates

What's Wrong with the Digital Paradigm Today?

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A Feminist Critique

The Covid-19 pandemic and its acceleration of digitalization [demonstrated](#) how the persistence of the gender digital divide in connectivity meant the continued exclusion of women and girls in, all their diversity, from critical segments of the digital economy and society. [Globally](#), men are 21% more likely to have access to the internet than women. In the world's least developed countries, this likelihood rises to 52%. The digital divide amplifies [intersectional inequalities](#), deepening the fault lines of geography, income, race, caste, age, gender identity, and other axes of social stratification.

Connectivity as a de facto market good has normalized a consumer-user framework that serves the interests of corporations and not of gender equality or social justice. The infrastructures of connectivity – underwater cables connecting cloud service points and internet exchange points – are owned and controlled by Big Tech firms. In many countries, the lack of reliable national infrastructure and the consequent dependence on Big Tech's internet infrastructure leads to a situation where domestic data traffic travels vast distances to reach overseas internet exchange points, with inordinate costs and delays in the process. Evidence [suggests](#) that countries relying on overseas exchange of data have fixed data charges that are 35 times higher than those with modern data infrastructure, while their mobile data charges are seven times higher.

What is clear is that we need to move beyond the narrow imaginary of connectivity as inclusion, and reimagine women's full participation in the digitalizing socio-economic order. From this starting point, the Working Group explored various dimensions of gender injustice in the institutional order of data capitalism, as discussed below.

2.1 Bodies and social relationality as fodder for the data matrix

The contractual consent paradigm used by Big Tech companies in their services does not safeguard individual or collective privacy, bodily integrity, and

decisional autonomy. Instead, bodies and social relations become fodder for the ceaseless expansion of data markets. The growth of the femtech industry, in particular, is cause for concern, as the sensitive personal data it aggregates can be mobilized by the new military-industrial complex of our times – the network-data complex of Big Tech and Big Brother – for [reproductive surveillance and biopolitical control](#) of gendered bodies to reinforce the hetero-patriarchal order.

Similarly, in the communications sphere, the profit drive of social media platforms [amplifies](#) sexualized attacks, gender-based hate speech and trolling, body shaming, and image-based abuse, leveraging existing fault lines of sexism, misogyny, and cultures of gender-based violence. Business models built on the currency of algorithmic virality power the attention economy of clickbaits and ads. With the emergence of the [embedded internet of the metaverse](#), these algorithmic cultures of gender-based violence have only intensified.

2.2 Gendered labor exploitation and exclusions in platform-controlled value chains

Planetary-scale platformization has exacerbated the existing fault lines in the global economy, reinforced global gendered labor hierarchies, and intensified the immiseration of women small farmers, micro-entrepreneurs, and workers in the global South. Agtech platforms controlled by Big Tech and Big Agri companies have expedited the [corporatization of agricultural production](#) in the global South, evacuating local pockets of capital formation and devalorizing the skills and knowledge of marginal women farmers. The algorithmic intelligence generated from the data about labor, land, and agricultural social relations of farming communities is enclosed using trade secret regimes and its value is [colonized](#) by Agtech service providers. In the global digital marketplaces of dominant e-commerce platforms, women entrepreneurs find themselves [unable](#) to compete on an equal footing. Women are concentrated in small businesses

that, due to low working capital and limited ability to bear risk, cannot sustain the unaffordable commission rates, onerous customer support requirements, and stock replenishment conditionalities of e-commerce companies. Another critical trend is the rise of industrial platforms and new affordances for intelligent automation that are expected to [disproportionately](#) affect sectors such as retail and food services that have a high percentage of routine manual tasks. Women constitute the majority of the workforce in these sectors.

Platformization has also catalyzed the rapid acceleration of digital services, with increasing segments of the services sector being transformed into digitally-mediated service work. The platform work model is maintained on a myth of workers being “independent service contractors”, when in actuality, they are reduced to being hustlers perpetually looking for the next “gig”, and are completely bereft of social protection or foundational labor guarantees – whether of decent work, occupational health and safety, or protection from sexual harassment – in an employment contract. In an economy dominated by such platformized gigs, women’s unpaid care work [underwrites the costs of social reproduction for capital accumulation](#).

Equally importantly, algorithmic mediation of the on-demand service work market by digital platforms [perpetuates and reproduces](#) traditional forms of gendered exclusion. Algorithmic rating systems of labor platforms reward and incentivize workers who operate on a “male breadwinner” logic, meaning they are willing to work very long hours. In doing so, these ratings systems discriminate against women workers who limit their hours on the platform or break their working day into segments in order to attend to care responsibilities.

Similarly, research on [online crowdwork in the global South](#) suggests that the hegemonic discourse of empowering flexi-work masks the emergence of a new gender compact between the patriarchal household and the capitalist market where there is a heightened labor squeeze. Not only do women shoulder

the unpaid care work burdens of the household, but they are now also expected to deploy their remaining time and energies to pursue gigs that maximize household income. Flexi-work is thus a misleading label for the precarious, atomized, and alienating gigs of the platform economy.

2.3 Gender bias and discrimination in frontier tech development

High-skill, high paying jobs of the future in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), data, and artificial intelligence (AI) development continue to be male-dominated. This not only means that women are being excluded from pathways of upward economic mobility in the digital economy, but also that, in the production of frontier data and AI technologies that shape social and economic life, their voices and perspectives are not represented.

Chatbots, virtual assistants, and automated interactive voice response (IVR) continue to reinforce [tropes](#) of gender subordination, male authority and expertise, and female subservience. The lack of diversity in design teams of AI systems results in the production of technology that often disregards local knowledge systems, is rarely contextualized to local needs, and exacerbates existing inequalities of race, gender, and class. The algorithmic black box, with all its limitations, further discriminates against people from marginalized and historically-oppressed communities by upholding “universal” standards that are extrapolated from historical training that is agnostic to the local socio-cultural milieu of its users and produces downstream effects of data bias. This can also result in disciplining subjectivities and reinforcing patriarchal narratives about gender subordination.

[Scholarship](#) demonstrates that due to the biases incorporated in data and algorithmic models, and the punitive use of these technologies, AI systems often discriminate against women, non-binary people, immigrants, low-income groups, [non-white populations](#), and non-English speakers, perpetuating exclusions in employment, housing, welfare, and criminal justice systems.

2.4 Ecological crisis

The cloud may be virtual but its carbon footprint is very much real. Computing power requirements of frontier data and AI technologies, such as cryptocurrency mining, are worsening the energy crisis. Emissions from manufacturing hardware, the use of these products, and the dumping of e-waste, mostly in the global South, have all contributed to the deepening ecological crisis.

To make matters worse, the [circular economy](#), often propounded as a “sustainable green growth strategy”, is more geared towards stimulating consumption than reducing waste; it leaves untouched the international division of labor and resource extraction from nature. [Research](#) has shown how companies such as Apple seek to brand themselves as circular economy companies even as their practices are farthest from ethical or environmentally responsible conduct. Business strategies of planned obsolescence and products with artificial lifespans force consumers [to buy](#) frequently upgraded and more expensive products, as reuse and repair become difficult, if not impossible.

2.5 Gendered exclusions in the digital welfare state

[Digital welfare systems](#) are predicated on creating, strengthening, and linking existing identification document systems. Since disenfranchised communities, such as [women, LGBTQI people, black and indigenous people, and refugees](#), often lack identification documents, they are effectively cut off from any meaningful access to the internet and digital welfare systems. Digitization of welfare also excludes them from social protection programs, making it difficult for them to access basic entitlements. Additionally, the collection of demographic data and linking the same with financial and welfare services can put vulnerable communities, such as sex workers and [trans people](#), at risk, through data leaks and large-scale networked data systems that visibilize them. Thus states, in their zeal to reduce fraud, [exclude](#) some of the most [marginalized groups](#).

While digital welfare systems are common across the globe, poor infrastructures, the [lack of data security systems](#) and less-than-optimal quality of services [make it harder](#) for people in middle- and low-income countries to access such services. Rampant digitization and automation of welfare and social protection systems have significantly changed the relationship of citizens with their governments, intensifying new forms of welfare surveillance and marketizing the social contract through de facto privatization of essential public services such as health and education.

The lack of accountability of the transnational digital corporations partnering with state agencies in welfare delivery is another emerging concern. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, has flagged with alarm that Big Tech companies in the digital welfare state tend to operate in an almost “human rights-free zone”!

In the current political context, addressing these risks to women’s human rights and gender justice agenda through feminist organizing is rendered even more challenging by the co-option of the empowerment discourse and public policy debates by powerful states and transnational digital corporations.

Digital capitalism reduces empowerment to a narrow project of valorizing a neoliberal subjectivity and a status-quoist politics of individual freedom. For instance, LGBTQI identity assertions play into Facebook’s campaign for a rainbow profile filter or 52 gender identity tick boxes, or Google’s rainbow doodle, even as these communication platforms make no effort to change their structures to ensure that these groups have an equal right to be heard. Even global digital policy debates are dominated by this neoliberal vision of empowerment through inclusion into the dominant digital economic order. At the World Trade Organization (WTO) and in regional digital economic cooperation frameworks, the United States and its allies use women’s digital enskillment and empowerment as bargaining chips to force developing countries to provide unbridled market access to transnational digital corporations.

In global digital policy debates, the dogma of multi-stakeholderist governance vogue has led to a situation where states and corporations are placed on an equal footing in making public interest decisions about the future of the internet as well as platform, data, and AI technologies. This is an ignominious case of [Big Tech governing Big Tech](#)! The erosion of democracy and the public interest digital innovation agenda in digital policy debates must be checked urgently if we are to reclaim the power of the digital technological revolution for gender equality.

As in the case of every political challenge, this one too presents us with an immense opportunity – to move past the narrow agenda of bridging the gender divide in access and use, and reclaim the trajectories of frontier digital and data technologies from digital capitalism to further a [public digital innovation agenda for gender equality](#).

New Directions for Feminist Political Organizing for a Gender-just Digital Future

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Feminist action and advocacy for a gender-just digital future needs to draw upon visions of individual and collective empowerment that reject the neoliberal frame and adopt decolonized alternatives for reconstructing the state, the market, and the public sphere in digitality. This is crucial to overcome the pervasive misrecognition, misrepresentation, and maldistribution in data capitalism, and move towards an alternative feminist digital future.

To make this institutional reimagining possible, revisioning the materiality of internet, platform, and data architectures is imperative. We need to reclaim the internet as a global public agora, rejecting outright the behavioral engineering of the dataveillance apparatus of digital capitalism. We also need a new social media architecture that restores the democratizing and serendipitous possibilities of the internet without mining and manipulating sociality for profit and fueling state-led, commercial and social surveillance. We need to invest in the public creation and maintenance of public platforms that are open and accountable in welfare service delivery; essential digital and data infrastructure in foundational sectors such as commerce marketplaces; and the emergence and flourishing of alternative platform enterprise models in the commons and social and solidarity enterprise traditions. At the same time, in order to benefit from aggregate anonymized data, we must invest in the development of new data governance frameworks that recognize individual sovereignty in and collective economic claims to data. Last but not the least, the trajectories of intelligent automation must lead to a reduction in drudgery and ease women's work.

From this starting point, the Working Group identified the following strategic directions for feminist organizing:

1. Take back the public internet agora from privatized platforms

The digital public sphere can be truly open and pub-

lic only when there is an end to algorithmic cultures of gender-based cyberviolence. The right to [public-ness](#) must be recognized as a foundational women's human right, and social media platforms must be held liable for encroaching on this right because of their inaction on misogyny and sexist hate speech.

Feminist advocacy efforts should call for a new global digital governance framework that recovers the communication commons of the internet as a global public good by introducing new checks and balances for the governance of the digital public sphere. The aim should be to keep it free from majoritarianisms, especially patriarchal cultures of everyday sexism and gender-based violence, and intrusive, disproportionate, and illegitimate surveillance. Investment in new feminist communication infrastructures and platforms that are not founded on behavioral surveillance are equally critical to create a safe space for feminist political organizing, especially for women in media and women human rights defenders.

2. Respond to women's human rights violations in all spheres of datafied sociality

Feminist collectives and movements should extend their critique of women's human rights violations in datafied sociality to the economic, social, and cultural rights agenda as well as the right to development. This means that, beyond digital rights activism that responds to the violations of first generation rights on internet agoras, feminist organizing needs to connect with civil society and social movements working in traditional development domains, such as agro-ecology, health, education, labor, and so on, in order to infuse their analysis with a feminist digital justice perspective and find common ground in the resistance to digital capitalism.

With the changing iterations of work in the platform economy, feminist movements need to move beyond the model of traditional unions by exploring new models for worker political organizing and worker-owned enterprises in the social and solidarity

economy tradition. New modes of collectivizing and networking must [take into account](#) the feminization of work and the high degree of individualization emblematic of the gig economy.

3. Always adopt an intersectional approach

In order for advocacy efforts to be effective, feminist collectives should be cognizant of the fact that the category ‘women’ is not a monolith. It is essential to take into account the diversity within feminist groups and movements, and adopt an [intersectional approach](#) to issues of concern. This would include being aware of other structures of inequality based on race, caste, and sexuality that interact with gender to disempower some women more than others. Additionally, it would mean vacating positions of power and privilege held by some in favor of those who have been historically marginalized. In the same vein, it is essential to build Southern feminist narratives and solidarities to counter under-representation from the South, and the resultant standardization and generalization of Northern feminist perspectives.

4. Appropriate the internet and frontier technologies for feminist economies

The commodification of feminism and the appropriation of feminist discourses by Big Tech needs to be challenged by reclaiming the internet’s communication commons. [Distributed cooperative organizations](#) leverage the network-data infrastructures of the platform model for furthering “mutual (human) support, cooperativism, care work, and social and environmental ends”, thus promoting the social and solidarity economies envisioned by feminists.

Feminists should also critically explore the impact of emerging technologies that can fundamentally change how work is conceptualized. For instance, robotic automation has the ability to radically alter the gendered division of labor, freeing women from the drudgery of jobs that have a high proportion of menial tasks.

5. Decolonize data governance debates

Dismantling the matrix of data domination requires a decolonial approach that resists the transplantation of Northern approaches into global South contexts, ignoring historical differences. The global South certainly needs a new paradigm of data governance which is grounded in democracy and prohibits non-transparent and extractive data collection practices, but this cannot be achieved by [imposing the European Union \(EU\) approach](#) to personal data protection and data markets governance on the rest of the world.

[Feminist critiques](#) of the EU approach to data governance have argued that the reduction of all human rights and social justice questions to personal data protection does not work; it fails to account for the risks to individual and collective sovereignty stemming from downstream processing of anonymized data and non-personal data. Instead, the global South needs a brand new approach to data governance that is able to effectively further individual and collective data sovereignty by ensuring that all uses of the intangible social commons of data are grounded in a human rights agenda that accounts for people’s right to development.

