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Feminist Encounters at the UN: The Global South and Women, Peace and Security Agenda

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Abstract:

To better understand how women's rights activists and civil society organizations (especially if they are from the Global South) managed to alter the UN commitment to gender-based violence and women's participation in conflict and peacebuilding, this paper presents a historical and political record of all these attempts. Challenging early paternalistic and protectionist framings that presented women as the primary victims of violent crime, the paper demonstrates how feminist norm entrepreneurs mobilized transnational advocacy, survivor testimony, and strategic framing to institutionalize the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, eventually leading to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and its subsequent architecture. Based on archival research, interviews with activists and UN officials, and discourse analysis of UN documents, the paper makes visible the often-overlooked importance of non-Western actors in setting the global norms of security. It argues that the WPS framework has limitations, especially around its technocratic and state focus, the securitization of women's rights, and the distance between international policy and domestic conditions. Centering Global South feminist critiques, the paper shows that the WPS agenda is not only a critical normative success but that its transformative power is held back by the patriarchal state structures and institutional logics of international governance.

Keywords: Women, Peace and Security (WPS); Global South; Feminist Activism; United Nations; Gender-Based Violence; Norm Entrepreneurship; Civil Society Organizations; Feminist International Relations; Peacebuilding; UNSCR 1325

Introduction

War is a universal phenomenon, and both men and women are its victims. It is estimated that 90 percent of casualties in modern conflicts are civilians compared to a figure of 10 percent a century ago (Solana, 2003, p. 2). However, men and women experience war differently (United Nations, 1995a).

For many years, gender-based violence against women was considered to be collateral damage of war. War crimes tribunals set up at Nuremberg and Tokyo, post-World War II in 1945 and 1946, respectively, exemplify international apathy towards instances of gender-based violence against women in those years. While instances of gender-based violence were rampant during the war, these were given only incidental attention at the

Tokyo tribunal. The victims' testimonies were considered irrelevant for the trials and were expunged from the world's memory until recently. At the Tokyo and Nuremberg tribunals, not a single individual was held responsible for the thousands of rapes that took place during World War II, making gender-based violence an untold story (Gardam, 1998). It had no specific mention of women, and it did not identify them as a distinct category of persons. These discussions together form that moment in International discursive and normative evolution when a change in the "logic of appropriateness" (March & Olsen, 1998) began. A large section of scholars working on Gender based Violence (GBV) during conflicts emphasize the gendered nature of armed conflicts where women are more often met with sexual violence in comparison to men (United Nations, 1995b; Dewey & St. Germaine, 2012; Enloe, 2000; Giles & Hyndman, 2004; Goldstein, 2003; Moser & Clark, 2001; Turshen & Twagiramaya, 1998). In the early 2000s, the United Nations (UN) recognized this reality by adopting resolutions which acknowledged that, in addition to the violence of war, women are subjected to Gender based Violence like rape, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, bodily torture, and mutilation, etc. (United Nations Security Council, 2002). Today, the reality of the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is well-accepted at the UN, though until the 1990s, such an opinion was entirely missing at the organization.

"Women fear rape by militia, rape by men who distribute aid in exchange for sex, and rape by husbands who demand that they replace dying children by producing still more children who will grow up to wage the national struggle- that is if the women survive their pregnancies and the children survive to adolescence"- Audrey Macklin in *Like Oil and Water with a Match- Militarized Commerce, Armed Conflict and Human Security in Sudan*.

-Macklin, A., 2004

Today, there is an active United Nations campaign called 'Stop Rape Now' which "unites the work of 13 UN entities ending sexual violence in conflict" (United Nations, 2011a). The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) recognizes various acts of sexual violence during conflicts as war crimes. These include "rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, other forms of grave sexual violence, and persecution on account of gender" (International Criminal Court, 2002). In addition, several resolutions have been passed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). In 2000, the UNSC passed the first of the WPS resolutions, resolution 1325, which addresses the impact of war on women and the importance of their participation in conflict resolution (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Resolution 1325 and its 9 sister WPS resolutions form the basis on which most of the UN's work on improving the situation of women in conflicts is carried out.

This paper tells the story of how women's rights activists from all over the world, and especially from the global south, shook the halls of power at the UN to make an indifferent UN take note of women's situation during conflicts. They succeeded along with other allies in committing it to the process of building an international architecture to protect

women from violations of their human rights, prevent conflict-related sexual violence, increase the participation of women in all decision-making processes during and post-conflict, and finally to mainstream gender in all of its peacekeeping and peacebuilding work. These areas today form the four pillars of an ever-increasing institutional response of the UN to violations of women's rights during conflict, which has collectively come to be called the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

This paper elucidates the story of the contribution of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and women's rights activists to the evolution of the WPS architecture at the UN. It sheds light on reflections from CSOs and activists of the global south on the past, present, and future of the WPS architecture, and in doing so addresses the following questions: What were the initial.

Motivation of CSOs and activists from the global south to engage with the various UN platforms to push for a response on women in conflict? How did these actors outside of the UN push for a normative and institutional change vis-à-vis women's rights in conflicts at the UNSC? What are their present assessments of the WPS architecture and its implementation in the global south? What expectations do they hold from the WPS agenda as it grows in new directions? Through the use of archival work, interviews, discourse analysis of UN literature, and review of existing literature, this paper asserts ownership of the global south over the WPS framework, illuminates the agency of non-Western, non-governmental actors in its evolution, and considers the potential of the UN framework to deliver on the expectations of women's rights activists.

The Early Years: The State Will Protect the Honour and Dignity of Weak Mothers

A normative discourse on violations of women's rights during conflicts did not quite emerge on the United Nations scene until the 1968 Conference on Human Rights, organized by it in Tehran, Iran, from 22nd April to 13th May 1968. The conference marked 20 years of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the first International Year of Human Rights. Prompted by the brutalities displayed to and during WWII by the Nazi regime and advancements in warfare technology, which made it possible to inflict mass-scale violence during armed conflicts, the issue of 'Human Rights during Conflicts' was tabled at the Tehran conference. On 12 May 1968, the conference adopted Resolution XXIII on Human Rights in Armed Conflicts, which stated the following;

...considering also that the widespread violence and brutality of our times, massacres, summary executions, tortures, inhuman treatment of prisoners, killing of civilians in armed conflicts, and the use of chemical and biological means of warfare, including napalm bombing, erode human rights and engender counter-brutality (United Nations, 1968).

The Tehran conference, however, steered clear of a gendered perspective on the issue. It had no specific mention of women; it did not identify women as a distinct category of

persons who suffered a different nature of violence from that suffered by men, nor did it recognize that the violations were often recruited as a tactic of war by parties to a conflict.

The Tehran conference provided concerned states and civil society representatives an opportunity to project onto the international consciousness the need to protect individuals from bodily violations; it was only at the UN body of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) that a gendered perspective was brought in. Following the adoption of Resolution XXIII at the Tehran conference, the CSW took note of the issue of human rights during armed conflicts and, in lieu of its mandate, introduced to the United Nations system a gendered perspective on it.

On 3rd February 1969, the CSW adopted Resolution 4 (XXII), which addressed

“The situation of women *and children* [emphasis added] during emergency, wartime, fighting for peace, national liberation, and independence. The Commission focused its attention on two main areas: the ‘legitimate’ protection of women and children during conflicts from “tragic conditions of life” which war, emergencies, and occupations create, and the furthering of political involvement of women in aspects of conflict prevention, mitigation, and resolution.”

- United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1969.

Operative paragraph 4 of the resolutions reads:

“The *protection of women and children* (emphases added) against inhuman practices in time of armed conflict or occupation should more than ever receive the attention of the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the United Nations Children's Fund, which should furthermore render greater assistance to them and to women and children in territories struck by natural disasters.”

- United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1969, p. 66.

Successive discussions at the CSW reveal apprehensions held by states in recognizing differential experiences of men and women during armed conflicts and question the basis on which protection to women should be granted. These discussions together form that moment in International discursive and normative evolution when a change in the “logic of appropriateness” (March & Olsen, 1998) began to take root at the UN. Various agendas competed for space at the conference.

March and Olsen describe the workings of the “logic of appropriateness” in their article, ‘The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders.’ They write, “as a cognitive matter, appropriate action is action that is essential to a particular conception of self. As an ethical matter, appropriate action is action that is virtuous” (March and Olsen, 1998)ⁱⁱ. The discussions at CSW established whether the provision of ‘special’ protection to women and children during conflicts is a virtuous and therefore appropriate response for the international community to take. Those who opposed the provision of protection questioned: What is distinct about women and their situation in conflicts that warrants supplementary protection not granted to men and boys?

In the course of the general debate, some representatives expressed doubt as to the relevance of the item on the commission's agenda, as it might imply that women, as opposed to all civilians, should have a special place. In their view, if the commission asked for special protection or special care for women, it might give the impression that it was asking for special privileges for them. All civilians, irrespective of sex, age, race, or creed, should be protected in case of armed conflict. Those country representatives who supported the idea of provision of protection to women during conflicts answered simply:

“The protection of women and children in wartime or emergencies was a most pressing task. Since the protection of women in peacetime was accepted as a legal right and not as a privilege, it was legitimate that this fact should be accepted also in emergency or wartime. It (the commission) was merely concerned with the legitimate protection of women as a group whose *physical nature and dual role* [emphasis added] in society made them more vulnerable in wartime.”

- United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1970, p. 31.

The CSW worked in tandem with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which, through its conferences on ‘Reaffirmation and Development of the International Humanitarian Law applicable in Armed Conflicts’ organized in Geneva in 1971 and 1972, brought together government representatives for similar discussions. At the ICRC conferences, these representatives questioned:

“The basis on which ‘women and children’ should be defined as a separate category of civilians needing specific protections. Much like the CSW session, the ICRC conference also resolved the conundrum by grounding the provision of protection in the notion that women were owners of fragile bodily constitution and decided to include women in the category of “persons deserving special protection by reason of their condition”. Providing women company in this specific category were children, wounded, sick, and infirm”.

- International Committee of the Red Cross, 1971, p. 42-45.

Another similarity between the normative churning taking place at CSW and ICRC conferences was the role of women in societies as mothers (reproductive agents and caregivers). A considerable amount of time was spent arguing that existing provisions of the IHL, which granted protection to mothers of children below 7 years of age, were sufficient to address the situation of women in conflicts. These provisions refer to "expectant mothers, and mothers of children under 7 years" or simply to "expectant mothers and maternity cases" (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1971, p. 42-45). The 1972 ICRC conference went on to declare that:

“Women shall be especially protected and respected in particular against rape and any form of indecent assault” (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1972, p. 74). Physical assaults were framed as assaults on dignity, a conceptualization echoed at the CSW in Resolution XII, adopted later that year on 2nd March 1972, which noted that, “women in war-torn areas are often victims of many forms of assault on personal dignity.”

- United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1972.

These discussions and debates eventually culminated in the adoption of the “Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict” by the UN General Assembly on 14th December 1974 through resolution 3318(XXIX) by a vote of 110 to 0 with 14 abstentions. Some of the important provisions of this declaration are:

“Attacks and bombings on the civilian population, inflicting incalculable suffering, especially on women and children, who are the most vulnerable members of the population, shall be prohibited, and such acts shall be condemned.”

- United Nations General Assembly, 1974, p. 1.

“The use of chemical and bacteriological weapons in the course of military operations constitutes one of the most flagrant violations of the Geneva Protocol of 1925, the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and the principles of international humanitarian law and inflicts heavy losses on civilian populations, including defenseless women and children, and shall be severely condemned.”

- United Nations General Assembly 1974: 2.

“All the necessary steps shall be taken to ensure the prohibition of measures such as persecution, torture, punitive measures, degrading treatment and violence, particularly against that part of the civilian population that consists of women and children.”

- United Nations General Assembly 1974: 2.

“All forms of repression and cruel and inhuman treatment of women and children, including imprisonment, torture, shooting, mass arrests, collective punishment, destruction of dwellings, and forcible eviction, committed by belligerents in the course of military operations or in occupied territories, shall be considered criminal.”

- United Nations General Assembly, 1974, p. 2.

It may be observed from the segments quoted above that there was an uninhibited use of terms such as “defenseless” and “vulnerable” in reference to women. And in listing out the atrocities that women and children are subjected to, there was no explicit mention of any form of sexual violence, but of “degrading” treatment. The declaration casts a light on the notions prevalent at the time regarding women and their myriad vulnerabilities. It is crucial to note that the formative years of an international conversation around the issue of women’s rights during conflicts did not emerge in a normative vacuum. Though states moved in what was a progressive direction at the time by recognizing women as a category of victims of conflict, the normative construction of the category of women as fragile, them being clubbed together with children, and the provision of protection to them because they serve the social role of mothers and caregivers to young children was nonetheless problematic. As the next section elucidates, CSOs and women’s rights activists who joined the process of pushing for a more concrete response from the UN to violations of women’s rights during conflicts would focus their attention on bringing to the international arena experiences of victims from various conflicts and question such patriarchal normative framing of women as fragile.

Feminist Activism Arrives at the UN

Even though the UN had entered the arena of international normative advancement regarding gender-based violence in armed conflicts in the late 1960s itself, it is noteworthy that it was not a normative leader with respect to the issue. The UN's engagement with the issue at the time could at best be called fragmented and reluctant. In the 1970s and 80s, the UN went through a process of norm emergence regarding GBV in conflict. In the process of normative evolution, norm emergence is the first stage, where an 'idea' supported by a few individuals, called norm entrepreneursⁱⁱⁱ is introduced to a social group (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) is introduced to a social group. Women's rights activists and CSOs from countries undergoing conflicts and internal disturbances played the crucial role of norm entrepreneurs who brought the idea of a concrete response from the UN to address women's rights in conflicts and pushed for it to be institutionalized. The critical operative mechanism by which norm evolution is encouraged is 'persuasion'. Norm entrepreneurs wish to convert those who are opposed to an idea by using various techniques of persuasion, by framing^{iv} various issues using non-patriarchal and transformative frames.

In 1975, through Resolution 3520 (XXX) on 15th December, the General Assembly announced the celebration of the "Decade of Women" from 1975-1985. It was to be celebrated through a series of 'World Conferences on Women', amongst other things, which would provide civil society and states with access to each other as they discussed ways to alleviate the status of women with respect to a host of issues. The conferences would also mark the beginning of the United Nations tryst with civil society groups, both of whom would find each other to be valuable partners with much to offer. During the Decade for Women, three large World Conferences on Women were held in 1975, 1980, and 1985 at Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi, respectively. These conferences culminated in the fourth and largest World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

At the first of these conferences in Mexico City, there was much enthusiasm about the conference, so much so that many countries tried to send majority women delegations to the conference. A total of 133 country delegations were represented by 1000 delegates, 75 percent of whom were women (Dierk, 1996). More significantly, there was a strong CSO and NGO participation at the conference. Around 6000 NGO forum attendees marked their presence and brought with them knowledge about the status of women from various parts of the world. Many of these NGO forum attendees were women from North and South America. For the women's rights activists, the conference presented a tremendous opportunity, unlike one seen before, to get access to the halls of power, the highest echelons of decision-making, and to an international organization of which almost all of the world's nations were members. The UN conferences provided civil society members with an opportunity unlike any other seen before. It "became a place where women brought issues ignored at the domestic level into the international spotlight to be addressed by the national governments" (Jolly et al., 2009, p. 75).

It was also for the first time in the UN's institutional history that its doors had been thrown open to massive civil society participation. For the United Nations and its member states, the conference allowed them to access information and knowledge not always available to them. Of this interaction, Devaki Jain comments, "Mexico City provided more than an action plan; it was a jumping board for the UN's interaction with the women's constituency" (Jain, 2005, p. 71). Moving forward with the decade for women, the Mexico City conference helped establish a precedent of engaging with the civil society groups.

At the conference, various agendas competed for space at the conference. The West wanted a meta-narrative of gender equality to be established, which would inform all future discussions on women. The global south wanted to draw the world's attention to the fact that poverty and lack of development are the main reasons behind the marginalization of women. And representatives from countries experiencing nationalist conflicts in the backdrop of decolonization efforts wanted to discuss peace. In the end, economic issues took precedence over others. Enid Kirton who was a member of the South Trinidad Club and the International Membership Committee and participated in both the World Conference and the parallel NGO forums observed that "economic and political issues had dominated discussions at both the Tribune and the Conference to such an extent that some people felt that the needs of women were short changed" (Business and Professional Women International, n.d.).

However, it wasn't until the Nairobi conference in 1985 that the issue of gender-based violence against women in conflicts was brought up significantly by the women's rights caucus. A total of 163 NGOs had access to the official proceedings of the conference in Nairobi in comparison to the 114 NGOs that were given access in Mexico. As the NGO groups improved their organization and lobbying skills and the United Nations opened up to involve them in the preparatory processes as well as the drafting of outcome documents, the issue of gender-based violence during conflicts found its way into the outcome document of the conference, The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women.

The conference aimed to review the work done in the preceding decade through the various UN auspices, especially with the ideological guidance of the two conferences on women in 1975 and 1980. In a nod to the equal importance of the three agendas on gender equality, development, and peace that vied for space at the international arena in 1975, the theme of the Nairobi conference addressed all three. The Nairobi forward-looking strategies in the area of peace focused on increasing women's participation in peace processes and promoting education for peace.

- United Nations, 1986

By the time the Beijing conference came around in 1995, the transnational advocacy group had grown exponentially to 3,000 NGOs, which were given accredited status, and 300,000 people who came to participate in the parallel NGO tribune, compared with 13,500 attending the NGO tribune in Nairobi. Obvious increase in numerical strength

aside, transnational advocacy networks utilized the knowledge they had gained at the previous world conferences regarding negotiations, campaigning, and networking to form pressure groups to register a bigger impact in the official proceedings and the outcome document at the Beijing World Conference.

It must be noted that CSOs and activists enhanced their influence on the United Nations and carried it beyond the Conferences by continuing their interactions with three other groups of actors- the interagency collective of women's rights advocates within the United Nations, survivors of gender-based violence, and UN member states who were allies of the women's rights movement. They utilized networking as a strategy to stitch together a pressure group of NGO's associated with the human rights of women during conflicts and worked with actors within the United Nations such as the CSW, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the Lessons Learned Unit at UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI) and Special Representatives and Rapporteurs to the United Nations Secretary General to act as a caucus of interconnected drivers of change and succeeded in bringing to the Security Council's table, the issue of gender based violence against women during conflicts.

CSOs worked closely with survivors of GBV who, at great personal cost, retold their stories at the international stage and lent the entire matter of pushing for a normative shift at the UN much-needed legitimacy. Such interactions also proved to be an important strategy for convincing policymakers and member states at the UN about the use of gender-based violence as a tactic of war by armed groups. Their primary assertion was that social constructs about women's bodies not belonging to them but to men, communities, and even nations make sexual violence deployable as a tactic of war and open up space for gender-based violence during conflicts (UNICEF 1996). Exposing the use of such patriarchal constructs, which link women's chastity with the prestige of their families and communities, lies at the core of CSOs' strategy.

The normative changes achieved by 1995 were not completely transformative in terms of developing a robust action-oriented policy framework, nor were these norms institutionalized^v. While the United Nations was a befitting choice of organizational platform to bring international attention to the issue, international norms had neither evolved satisfactorily nor were there any mechanisms created to implement them. CSOs and allies within the UN system, therefore, began to push for such a deepening of institutional engagement- adoption of the Security Council resolution on Women, Peace and Security.

On 31st October 2000, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1325 (United Nations Security Council, 2000) that sought to mainstream gender perspectives into the Council's work on all aspects of conflict resolution from conflict prevention to peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and rehabilitation and reconciliation efforts. Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) and other forms of violence against women and girls. The adoption of the resolution came

after the Council held an open discussion on the theme of Women, Peace and Security on 24th and 25th October 2000 (United Nations, 2002). Today, WPS forms an integral thematic pillar of the council's work. The Council has passed a total of ten resolutions on the theme, holds an annual open debate on WPS in addition to a host of other institutional rules and mechanisms that have been put into place over the last two decades. Most recently, an Informal Experts group was set up on Women, Peace and Security, which since 2016 has been providing expertise and guidance to the Council on matters of urgent concern (UN Women, n.d.).

With the adoption of Resolution 1325, the UNSC became the primary forum for negotiating a policy and institutional response to the rampant assault on women's rights during conflicts. The story of how UNSC resolution 1325 was adopted is one of several strategies combining to push forward a norm. After not receiving much traction with UNSC members for the issues of women's rights during conflicts, the then director of UNIFEM, Noeleen Heyzer, took the help of two well-known and well-loved male diplomats in 2000, Stephen Lewis and Rafeeuiddin Ahmed^{vi} whom Klot calls "door openers."^{vii} who she defines as "men and women who are willing to use their credibility and authority to legitimise a feminist agenda and create opportunities to advance it" (Klot, 2015). Lewis and Ahmed, through their efforts, managed to convince the council members to hold an Arria formula meeting^{viii} on the 23rd of October 2000.

At this particular Arria meeting, NGO representatives from Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Zambia (United Nations, 2002), as well as other NGO representatives working in the field of peace and security, like Amnesty International, brought survivors of the Rwandan genocide to meet council members. The intention was to enable the council members to get a first-hand account of the struggles that women living in conflict situations are put through, which were then being left unaddressed by the council, despite being the largest actor in the field of peace, conflict, and security. They urged council members to respond to the needs of women in conflicts, prevent and protect them from attacks threatening their bodily integrity, and take concrete measures to support the participation of women in all stages of conflict prevention and resolution by developing an institutional framework of rules, mechanisms, feedback paths, gender trainings, etc.

The council members were convinced, and after an open debate on the issue on 23rd and 24th October, they adopted Resolution 1325 on 31st October 2000. The resolution recognized that:

"An understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, effective institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection and full participation in the peace process, can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security."

- United Nations Security Council, 2000, p. 2.

“The UNSC architecture on WPS, which grew from resolution 1325, is the most prominent outcome of the peace activism and regional peace movements led by women around the world, but most significantly in countries of the global south. These associations became the “precursors to UNSCR 1325 and the associated cluster of resolutions.”

- Goswami, Samuel, & Khan, 2017.

“Seeking to institutionalize this association of the UN entities working on Women, Peace and Security with the civil society to incorporate local issues and experiences, in 2000, the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security was formed. Today, it is a consortium of 18 international NGOs that work together to advance the WPS agenda at the UN.”

- NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, 2019.

The securitization of the women and peace agenda, however, bore some unanticipated consequences. While CSOs had led the movement to shift the UN discourse on women and conflict, questioning the patriarchal nature of wars and how they are fought, the WPS architecture took on a technocratic form and focused most of its attention on making wars safe for women while leaving patriarchal structures in post conflict reconstruction intact. In addition, the reality of negotiating with UNSC members- an extremely male-dominated patriarchal setting meant giving up the larger transformative agenda in exchange for achieving what the council could actually do. This meant letting go of the agenda to transform the patriarchal state and letting the council instead focus primarily on responding to sexual violence in ways understood by these very states.

The main criticism levied at the WPS architecture by CSOs and peace activists today is as follows:

- 1) Gender based violence equals rape: WPS resolutions are accused of narrowing down international normative and conceptual understanding of gender-based violence during conflicts to focus almost singularly on sexual violence (Heineman, 2013) and ‘rape as a weapon of war’. The socio-political reasons behind instances of GBV are left almost unaddressed by the UNSC.
- 2) Violence in peacetime and conflicts are unrelated: The WPS agenda is also accused of undermining the common link between violence against women during peacetime and violence during conflicts and post-conflict times. As Abigail Disney argued in a statement at a meeting of the Nobel Women’s Initiative on sexual violence in war, “Rape is not the problem. Rape is a symptom of the problem. And the answer is not to attempt to stop men from raping women, but to categorically change women’s values and status in their communities” (Nobel Women's Initiative, 2011). The crucial link that connects violence pre- and post-conflict is overlooked by the Security Council.

Dr. Indira Skoric, who worked as the coordinator of the NGO Working Group on WPS, in a personal interview, spoke about the disappointment amongst some members of the NGO Working Group on WPS at the overall blindness to the links between gender-based

violence in society during peacetime and during conflicts. Calling the approach of the Council towards CRSV simplistic, she explains that:

“You cannot look at this separately [sexual violence in conflicts and peacetime]. When the UN system started talking of stopping sexual violence in war as if it existed only in conflict. But I think what was happening in Bosnia at the time, I think there were lots of people involved who were conflicted. Are women victims, agents, or survivors? How do they fight? Do they fight?”

“The Policy language happens to be... There have been 20 thousand or 50 thousand rapes, so then they [the council] start focusing on the numbers, whereas the fact is -this is gender-based violence, and it doesn't matter if it's 15 women or 50 thousand women who were raped. I think it was very simplistic of the UN to look at only gender violence in conflicts.

- Skoric, 2018.

WPS resolutions are a balance of pushing for progressive language, the need to affect real changes in the lives of women living in conflict situations, and building consensus amongst a group of 15 states, five of whom hold the right to veto any proposition that they find contradictory to their larger state interests. Dr. Skoric underscored the need to realize this reality about the UN by those in civil society who engaged with the Council, hoping to see more substantial changes than have been achieved till now, in addition to these being based on more nuanced understandings of GBV during conflicts.

“I think the NGOs, when they have so much grassroots information and knowledge, become sort of impatient. Of course, when I was there, we were clear we wanted something specific to come out of the resolutions, not what 1325 is like, but more specific and push not only the member states but also the UN system, particularly on issues like the peacekeepers (sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers). But the UN operates by the number of flags you see outside and the way they [member states] represent their views, and if you don't understand that these are states, you're going to be wasting your efforts.”

-Skoric, 2018

Highlighting the importance and role of organizational and global politics in the evolution of the WPS agenda, Dr.Goetz^{ix} stated in a personal interview that, though theoretically and conceptually issues such as the bifurcation of violence against women into conflict-related and non-conflict related does not hold water, there are also certain organizational and political realities that actors working on the WPS agenda must contend with.

Whilst pushing for a new norm within the various UN forums, there exists a host of actors, such as ally states, contrarian states, civil society actors, and UN professional staff, who contribute to the process of framing emergent norms based on their interests and worldview. Therefore, although a norm may be introduced and framed by one set of actors, and in the case of the WPS agenda, norm entrepreneurs have largely been CSOs and women's rights activists, the framing may alter significantly over the course of its adoption and internalization at the UN.

Further, though the initial impetus to change norms and introduce alternate ways of thinking about the condition of women in conflict situations was introduced by civil society, the outcomes are not theirs to own. Even though the civil society used various UN platforms to promote new norms, it does not possess any authority to coerce states into either adopting them or complying with them. This defines an almost singularly true aspect about the procedure of norm change at the international level, especially at the UN, where state sovereignty is granted and protected through the UN charter.

“In 2015, the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security, along with other partners, conducted a CSO Survey for the Global Study on Women, Peace and Security, and published its findings in a report, 15 years after the adoption of the first WPS resolution. The survey sample consisted of 371 CSOs in 71 countries and attempted to highlight examples of good practice, implementation gaps and challenges, and priorities for action. The survey found that a large majority of CSOs judge the WPS agenda to be only moderately effective in changing the situation of women and girls in conflict-affected countries (31%), and overall, 70% of CSOs rated the agenda in the ‘below moderate’ to ‘above moderate’ category. The primary reason given for this by CSOs is that UNSC 1325 and its sister resolutions have not met the transformative agenda that they had expected them to possess”.

- The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, 2015.

Respondents of the CSO survey identified some other core issues that they believe prevent the WPS agenda from being truly relevant and transformative to the lives of women in the Global South. Foremost amongst these was the lack of resources available to local CSOs and regional networks to expand their peace activities (The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, 2015). This was followed by a less-than-cordial relationship that many governments in the global south share with CSOs and the overall lack of trust with which they approach their work. According to respondent CSOs, this has cultivated a gap between rapidly evolving WPS policies at the international level and the local ground realities with which they have to contend. Rita Manchanda, a foremost peace advocate from India, in a webinar conducted on new directions in the WPS agenda in October 2020, stated that the WPS agenda had “developed cracks” with respect to women in South Asia and the global south in general.

To increase the relevance of the WPS architecture for the global south context, CSOs recommend that it should focus on two aspects:

- a) Increase and institutionalize the participation of CSOs and women living in conflict-affected areas in local and global decision-making processes to ensure newer policies are as survivor-centric as possible, and
- b) Move away from a militarized to a gendered version of peace and security. This would mean questioning and removing barriers to women’s participation in peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, ensuring zero tolerance for sexual abuse and exploitation of local women by UN peacekeepers, and ensuring the needs of women in conflict are centred more frequently in UN peacekeeping mandates.

Conclusion

The previous discussion has explicated in detail the role of CSOs, mostly from the global south, in the evolution of the UN's WPS agenda. It left us at a point where the goal of transnational women's rights activists in getting the UN to address the situation of women in conflicts was met, but with different consequences than what the CSOs had hoped for. Today, the CSOs evaluate the WPS agenda as being only moderately successful in impacting the lives of women and girls in conflict situations and even consider it to be very relevant to their local settings. A primary hurdle is the inability of the WPS agenda to circumvent or transform the patriarchal state agenda. Several states in the global south are experiencing internal disturbance, which cannot neatly be categorized as armed international conflicts, making the WPS agenda redundant in those situations. Though in 2013, General Recommendation No. 30 of the CEDAW Committee expanded the definition of conflicts to incorporate situations of internal disturbance, ethnic and communal violence, many states, such as India and Nigeria with active internal disturbances simply refuse to adopt the WPS paradigm in the domestic context limiting its effectiveness and capability to provide relief to women and girls (Basu, 2016).

The major takeaway from the preceding discussion has been the singular agenda of the women's peace movements from the global south to subvert patriarchal structures and their repercussions that play out in conflicts. This was the aim with which they approached the world conferences on women as well as the UN Security Council. The same point was echoed loudly by representatives of CSOs from South Asia at the regional 'Open Day' organized by the UN Women office in New Delhi, India, in 2011. Activists from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka flagged the real danger CSOs face of getting co-opted by the militarized peace agenda of the UN Security Council and losing track of the initial radical agenda of initiating socio-political transformations in countries undergoing conflict.

Criticism of the WPS architecture aside, present expectations of CSOs from it still reflect the need for WPS resolutions and UN agencies to utilize peacebuilding:

“As a transformative agenda to question the patriarchal nature of the state. Whilst accepting that one of the foremost successes of the WPS agenda has been the increased presence and participation of women in all peace processes, CSOs go on to underscore that it is not enough that women be given a place at the peace table, but that these women participants ask: what are they negotiating for at the peace table? Can they influence what is brought to these negotiation tables as an agenda? Where and how do they draw red lines vis-à-vis what they are willing to compromise on? And how do they ensure that they themselves are not co-opted by the patriarchal state agenda, which they had been fighting to circumvent.”

- Goswami, Samuel, & Khan, 2017

The patriarchal security structures within which WPS architecture is rooted indeed preclude radical transformations of the socio-political realities of women in conflict. Given this stark reality, many CSOs have chosen to rely on local and national procedures

and rules to break the cycle of women's human rights violations in conflicts (Basu, 2016). This insistence on non-engagement with the WPS agenda by CSOs in the global south provides answers for why it is adjudged mediocre by CSOs in the global south.

Taking forward the point raised by Indira Skoric and Dr. Goetz earlier, certain organizational realities, like the privileging of state sovereignty, translate rather easily into the UN's incapacity to subvert state agendas that are incompatible with women's rights immediately. The UN agencies work by making incremental changes to international policies, which often are neither drastic nor immediate in their outcomes. While the WPS agenda can be improved in myriad ways and much work remains to be done for it to meet its real potential of effecting changes on the ground, it must also be realized that the endgame of CSOs vis-à-vis women's situation in conflict cannot be fully realized through the UN auspices. Such a reality necessitates that CSOs continue to deepen their work on the path of 'Women and Peace'. The UN has charted its own territory of Women, Peace, *and Security*. Its organizational realities and the larger structural realities of international politics dictate that the twain shall never quite meet.

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Navigating Surveillance and Data Protection Laws: Examining Ramifications on Women's Privacy in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The era of digital reality has brought forth technological affordances that present numerous challenges, including the growing intricacies of data protection and privacy. Amid the rapid pace of technological advancements, emerging new-age issues often go unnoticed. Zeroing in on these issues, we will focus on the ramifications of the overarching panopticonic nature of the surveillance women face today. This paper explores the concept of surveillance, focusing on its subtypes, such as dataveillance, self-surveillance, and the panopticon model. India, with its gendered socio-cultural and economic structure, creates, cultivates, and maintains various marginalities along with their intersections, which are ultimately reinvented into the realm of cyberspace. Drawing from a South Asian perspective, this paper aims to understand surveillance as a feminist issue by providing numerous examples, such as the beauty and apparel industry using user data with no regulations. Or even the unrestrained surveillance done via pregnancy and menstrual trackers or beauty apps. Additionally, it examines why surveillance asymmetrically affects women and delves into the specific harms it poses to women in India, considering the intersecting multiple marginalities they face. The paper gives a glimpse into how existing data protection laws comprehend the intricacies of gendered realities. Drawing upon diverse concepts intertwined with technological examples, the paper aims to determine how digital data protection laws should incorporate gendered aspects to prevent the existence of loopholes that exacerbate vulnerabilities for women online.

Keywords: Gendered Surveillance, Data Protection, Privacy Laws, Femtech, Indian Women

India's digital landscape has seen many technological advancements and has gone through rapid changes in the last few decades. Especially with the onset of the "Digital India" campaign, keeping in line with the global tech revolution, India has also created a legitimate space for itself as both a market and a producer of digital goods and services. Following the JIO revolution (Zakaria, 2023), the internet's widespread accessibility has brought millions of Indians online, leading to the continuous mining and processing of their data. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, defines data as information, facts, concepts, opinions, or instructions in a manner suitable for communication,

interpretation, or processing by a person or by any automated means. As Clive Humby argues, data has become the new oil (Humby, 2006), on which the new world economies are running; thus, it becomes pertinent for us to understand what kind of threats this new world order poses and what sort of ‘risk society’ (Bleck, 1992) we are heading towards.

Though women's access to technology and hence presence online is minuscule, their data is being mined and utilised in far more complex ways, often serving the interests of capitalist entities. This exploitation can have direct repercussions on women, given the prevailing patriarchal social structure, which further marginalises them and exacerbates the consequences they face. Keeping this at the centre of our argument, we intend to argue about how the changing landscape around digital data collection and control over it can be looked at in terms of surveillance. Building upon it through a feminist gaze, we analyze the complexities of data surveillance and its effect on women. This paper uses a gendered analytical lens to analyse how India's evolving data protection regime is shaped and changing, providing an analysis, exploring privacy and data governance through a gendered analytical lens, with the view that the relation of data governance and privacy requires that existing social inequalities be recognised. Law thus has historically served a transformative role in India in the name of social justice and equality. Data protection legislation too must transcend formal neutrality and be shaped by, and must take account of, gendered surveillance, exclusion, and marginalisation. Gender-responsive legal regimes are needed to make it possible to construct digital governance that does not reproduce or exacerbate structural discrimination and rather ensures substantive equality and justice in the digital space.

This paper is divided into five major parts, beginning with an exploration of what surveillance is and surveillance practices in India, with an emphasis on historical and contemporary contexts of women's surveillance. Moving forward, we examine the intersection of FemTech, surveillance, and women's bodies, underlining how data collection perpetuates gender biases and beauty standards. It then gives a brief overview of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, discussing its effectiveness, especially in safeguarding women's privacy rights. Lastly, it calls for the development of a gender-just data privacy law in India, emphasizing the need to address intersecting vulnerabilities and ensure that digital spaces benefit all citizens equally.

Surveillance - A Feminist Perspective

Surveillance has been defined in multiple ways; it basically involves detailed observation of individuals with or without their knowledge. David Lyon has given a commonly agreed-upon definition of surveillance, stating it to be “any collection and processing of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purposes of influencing or managing those whose data have been garnered” (Lyon, 2001, 2). Professor Rosalind Gill, in her breakthrough article on surveillance, has argued that “we are living in a moment of unprecedented surveillance: surveillance by the state, by corporations, by media, and by technology companies, the latter amassing an almost unimaginable amount of

information about us from our 'data trails'(Gill, 2019). Zuboff highlights how these data trails and, hence, personal data and privacy of people are exploited by companies such as Google for profit, a practice referred to as "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2015). Dubrofsky and Magnet, in their book 'Feminist surveillance studies', quote Foucault (1995) who has "emphasised the productive potential of surveillance as a technology of statecraft, where the state produces the docile bodies essential to its functioning" (Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015, 2). In today's world, surveillance has become increasingly automated (Andrejevic 2019), needing a new theorization of surveillance. Many scholars have conceptualised surveillance and its many avatars. Roger Clarke (1988) came up with a concept to contextualise surveillance in terms of data, and "the systematic monitoring of people or groups, by means of personal data systems, to regulate or govern their behaviour," which he labelled dataveillance. Foucault, in his book "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison," published in 1975, talks about the panopticon, which is a prison model based on Jeremy Bentham's theory (1798). This prison was envisioned with a central watchtower from which an observer could watch all the inmates in the facility without them knowing when they were being watched. Panopticonic surveillance, according to Foucault (1977), forces the prisoners to regulate their behaviour so much so that they internalise and self-discipline themselves due to the fear of being constantly watched. This behaviour has been dubbed "self-surveillance."

Foucault used the Panopticon as a metaphor to explore the dynamics of power and surveillance in modern society. He argued that in such a system, individuals would internalise the surveillance and regulate their own behaviour as a result. This concept of individuals monitoring and disciplining themselves through the perception of being watched is a key aspect of self-surveillance, even though Foucault did not use the term "self-surveillance" explicitly. Instead, he focused on the broader notion of disciplinary power and its effects on individuals and society. According to Vaz and Bruno (2002), Self-surveillance is typically understood as the level of attention individuals give to their actions when they are aware of being under observation, either directly or indirectly, by others whose opinions they consider important, often those who hold a similar or higher social status.

This paper is based on the social understanding that surveillance has been deeply rooted in society's social and cultural structures (Browne 2015). We aim to further explore surveillance by contextualising it in a South Asian, especially Indian, feminist context. According to Kevin Walby and Seantel Anaïs, joining in "feminist critiques with surveillance studies fosters a research agenda which focuses upon how assumptions about sex and gender are embedded in the classifications and categories on which surveillance itself relies" (Walby and Anaïs 2015). To do so, we will take a holistic approach to understanding how women's bodies have been surveilled in India and the ramifications that women face as a result. We will also be critically analysing the existing laws and provisions through a feminist, gender sensitive lens to understand the data security and privacy measures that have been brought in by the state to ensure data privacy and security of its citizens.

Surveillance in India

The new technologies and mobile applications have been mining our data relentlessly. This hampering of our data privacy, without an ounce of our notice that our private data is being traded, where we innocently accept terms and conditions of apps, has been normalised, transforming our everyday lives into what Murakami-Wood calls a “surveillance society” (Murakami Wood et al. 2006). Data Privacy is generally understood as the right to be left alone or to be free from misuse or abuse of one’s personal data. Privacy, when discussed in the abstract, can inadvertently prioritise the rights of the most privileged members of society, overlooking the unique struggles faced by women. Historically, the concept of privacy has often failed to protect women's interests, as it primarily centred on preserving the sanctity of homes, without addressing the privacy needs of women (Privacy International 2014). This background allows us to probe into surveillance with a gendered perspective, which promises a fundamental reimagining of the field that will open up a range of new and important avenues of inquiry. Gendering the field involves thinking about surveillance practices as socially located, as embodied, and as having differential impacts according to Robert Heynen and Emily van der Meulen (2016).

The need to engender surveillance also needs to be looked at through the lens of how women from the Indian subcontinent have always faced surveillance in ever-changing avatars. The newer high-tech modes of surveillance are adding to the already surveilled bodies of women in India's brahminical patriarchal^x context and socio-cultural practices. For example, Indian women for generations have worn bangles on the wrists, and *payals* (Anklets) on their feet as symbols of auspicious conjugal Indian womanhood (Thapan, 2009). We believe that this jewelry has also served the purpose of surveillance and control. It has helped the elderly women of the households to keep track of their daughter-in-law's movements. For instance, if a daughter-in-law stops moving her hands and takes a break from her household chores, likely, her bangles will also stop clinking, which will be followed by her mother-in-law chastising her for taking a break. Similarly, the melodic trickling of *payals* in one's feet actually helps keep track of how far one person is or how close they are. Women had been trapped in the four walls of their homes for centuries, and their sexuality was surveilled through such means. It's not a huge surprise, then, that these notions of wanting to keep women “safe” and controlled and hence, under surveillance, have found means in the newer technology. As Simone Brown (2015) states, “rather than seeing surveillance as something inaugurated by new technologies, such as automated facial recognition or unmanned autonomous vehicles (or drones), to see it as ongoing is to insist that we factor in how racism and anti-blackness undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order.”

The technological advancements in surveillance came at a rapid pace, carrying a guise of neutrality. This neutrality is a disguise, as Shoshana Amielle Magnet (2015) states, “technologies, biases, preconceptions, and prejudices can be baked into the code, where they continue to operate in opaque ways. To understand the patterns and complexities of

these surveillances and their ramifications on South Asian women we would like to take aid of the feminist surveillance studies framework (Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015), which points out the need for a feminist reflection on surveillance to “highlight areas where a focus on surveillance requires explicit attention to critical feminist concerns and a questioning of the taken-for-granted, of what is often mundane and seamless, with a profound sense that what goes unquestioned can be dangerous, particularly for disenfranchised bodies.” We believe India, with its gendered socio-cultural and economic structure, creates, cultivates, and maintains various marginalities along with their intersections, which are ultimately reinvented into the realm of cyberspace. Surveillance of women's bodies is done in accordance with the notions of Indian society, which is an intricate web of complex societal structures rooted in brahmanical patriarchal norms and socio-cultural practices. This means that women in India are always positioned at a critical intersection of multitudes of oppressions, namely of gender, class, caste, race, and religion, and many more. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has dubbed such interlocking systems of oppression a “matrix of domination” that women and other minority groups suffer from.

Arguing on the lines of Heynen and van der Meulen, Surveillance in India is also performed under the guise of enabling “security” (Heynen and Meulen 2016), especially in the case of young women, where this gendered nature of surveillance reduces women’s mobility and access to freedom, while constraining their engagement in political activism (Kovacs 2017). This normalises other forms of surveillance on women's bodies. There is a curfew on women far stricter than their male counterparts. This leads to unfair treatment and restriction of mobility, which in turn literally affects their citizens’ rights as free individuals. We would like to invoke the example of the *Pinjra Tod* (Breaking the Cage) movement to capture how surveillance is normalised in India and how women have fought against it. During the movement, female students at the University of Delhi came out in protest against the university authorities for restricting their movement by imposing a strong curfew, along with “dress codes, mandatory local guardians, removal of locks from room doors and installation of CCTVs within the hostels, including near bathrooms.” (Sen 2018) Given the diversity of the university students, it is pertinent that the governance measures in the guise of ‘safety and security’ impacted differently for different women. However, they collectively demanded that they be set free from this constant surveillance. By limiting these students' evening hours, their exposure to and participation in extracurricular academic activities, like access to the library after college hours, evening sports, and late-night performance arts, were constrained. Paromita Sen (2018) argues that these “are practices that also thwart the process by which some young women attempt to gain independence from their families, as any attempt to ‘be independent’ is reported to their families. In this way, the university is literally surveilling students and reporting to families.” This kind of surveillance is very similar to panopticonic surveillance (Foucault, 1977), where, in this case, the students are similar to the prisoners who always feel the omnipresence of authorities and start self-disciplining themselves so as not to come into conflict with the established power structures. On the other hand, authorities justify these limitations on the movement as a means to ensure

their focus on their academics and their safety and security on campus. It is not just college students who are surveilled daily under the guise of safety and security; the trend of "CCTVisation" has expanded across Indian metro cities. Initiatives aimed at enhancing women's safety resulted in an extensive network of CCTV surveillance, transforming Delhi into a city with more cameras per mile than London or Paris (TOI 2023). Intense use of digital tools for monitoring and e-governance purposes can end up harming citizens. While the harms of digital Surveillance are not easily visible, their ramifications on marginalized sections and women can be life-threatening. This stereotypical argument of women needing protection is often monetized to build Structures of State - Surveillance. As a result, people often become acclimated to surveillance practices, leading to their normalization in everyday life. This normalization extends beyond individuals and seeps into the socio-political landscape through policies and laws, with a predominant focus on "protecting" women rather than upholding their fundamental privacy rights. Transitioning from this broader context of gendered surveillance and data privacy, let's now zoom in on the impact of these issues on Indian women in the digital landscape, particularly through the example of the rising FemTech industry.

Gendered Surveillance, Data Extraction, and FemTech: A Feminist Analysis from the Indian Context

A feminist analysis of gendered surveillance, data extraction, and FemTech within the Indian context. Surveillance, defined by Lyon (2001) as the systematic collection and processing of personal data to influence or to govern behavior, is a central feature of contemporary socio-technical systems. Contemporary societies are characterised by unprecedented forms of surveillance, and the state will not just be the chief actor; this is the new order in modern society, and it is often increasingly being defined by corporations and technology firms that extract, analyze, and sell individual digital footprints of users (Gill, 2019; Zuboff, 2015). Feminist surveillance studies broaden this critique, positioning surveillance practices as entrenched by gendered, racialised, and socio-cultural power relations and thus producing uneven and often injurious consequences for marginalized groups (Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015). In relation to Foucauldian inquiries about disciplinary power, surveillance has moved beyond external power to an internalizing of observation that demands individuals self-surveil and regulate their behaviour, the so-called self-surveillance which Foucault (1977; Vaz & Bruno 2002) calls the process. Feminist authors stress that for women, such practices have long organized women's lives through mechanisms, daily as a matter of operation, that exert discipline on bodies, mobility, sexuality, and labour. As such, surveillance should be seen as historically continuous and embedded more as a sociopolitical phenomenon that was never simply a digital technology implementation (Browne, 2015). In the Indian experience, women's bodies are under surveillance in layers that are based on brahmanical patriarchal norms and socio-cultural practices.

“What seem like low-profile customs, such as gender-specific dress codes or clothing or accessories, serve as informal technologies of control, controlling the movement and productivity

of women in both domestic and communal spaces. These historically inculcated practices are the cultural architecture of modern digital monitoring, frequently legitimised through the discourse of the “safety” and “protection” of women. Such stories hide the extent to which surveillance also limits women’s agency, movement, and political involvement, and that it normalises surveillance in everyday contexts”.

- Heynen & van der Meulen, 2016; Kovacs, 2017.

India’s deepening digital infrastructures, such as data-hungry mobile apps, CCTV, and e-governance platforms, have only compounded these dynamics. Even when claimed to be neutral or technologically neutral, feminist critiques show how surveillance technologies reflect established gender, caste, class, and religion in coded and unaccountable ways (Magnet, 2015). Women in India who occupy the boundaries of several oppressive systems can feel these types of surveillance more significantly than in other contexts, a phenomenon that Collins (1990) conceptualizes as a “matrix of domination.” This is where the phenomenal growth of FemTech, including technologies founded and run outside of India, requires criticism. FemTech platforms routinely collect data that is incredibly personal, about menstruation, fertility, sexual health, pregnancy, and mental well-being. If it is written within Global North epistemologies and rolled out in India without adequate consideration for local socio-cultural norms, power asymmetries, and regulatory gaps, it is possible that the technologies could be capable of exacerbating oppressive systems of gendered surveillance. Data generated on Indian women’s bodies is regularly influenced by foreign corporate policies of governance and by foreign legal jurisdiction, with very real implications on informed consent, data sovereignty, privacy, commercial exploitation, and commodification. Further, by portraying FemTech as empowering and liberating, it all too often downplays the self-surveillance that is what is often a part of the package. These technologies can help reinforce the normative notions of womanhood and health, which are dictated by biomedical and market-inspired norms, by pushing for constant monitoring and optimisation of physical functioning. In such a socio-political milieu, where women’s bodies are already the target of heightened scrutiny by families, schools, communities, and the state. FemTech risks a new layer of surveillance in the guise of care, choice, and safety. Therefore, a feminist surveillance studies perspective is critical to examining FemTech’s ramifications in the Indian environment. This approach goes beyond narrow data protection concerns to interrogation of how global technological systems meet local patriarchal structures, and new forms of body governing and controlling emerge. Without sustained feminist critical inquiry, FemTech, as both a product created and implemented outside of India, runs the danger of replicating colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal logics within surveillance instead of building genuine bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and rights to gendered data.

FemTech, Surveillance, and Women's Bodies

With the onset of liberalisation of the economy in India, the state pulled back from being the middleman between big corporations and citizens, leaving citizens at the mercy of conglomerates. This fits into Gill's argument that in the era of “neoliberal capitalism, there

is an emphasis upon individualism and the need for subjects who embrace risk and take responsibility for themselves. (Gill 2019) This is reflected in almost all laws crafted by the state regarding data privacy, where individuals are considered and held responsible for their own well-being online. This means that if a photo is leaked in the realm of cyberspace, the individual would be held more responsible for sharing a picture online rather than the company, which was supposed to protect the privacy of this person. In women's cases, things like these can have real-life, devastating consequences. A recent case in India involved a 21-year-old woman who was criminally blackmailed through a fake loan app. After installing the app, which deceptively gained access to all her contacts and photographs without explicit consent, the perpetrators obtained and morphed nude pictures of her. The criminals then sent these manipulated images to her parents, using them to coerce the family into repaying the loan with exorbitant interest rates. In the Indian society, where women are considered the “*izzat*.”^{xi} Of their family, these pictures left the girl and her family helpless, as those images being leaked would have caused a lot of societal shame (Shekhar 2023).

The massive growth of solution-oriented tech has also percolated in the fashion and beauty industry in the last few decades. While data security and privacy issues emerging from these ever-growing industries affect all users, they can have a disproportionate impact on women. As argued earlier, the patriarchal socio-cultural structures are reflected in the digital sphere; here, we further want to add that the data aggregated through the so-called “beauty apps” set extremely biased beauty standards for women. Apps like Myntra Beauty, SkinKraft, and TroveSkin collect real-time data of women through selfies and quizzes, and then provide customised solutions to individuals. Eriksson and Kenalemang (2023) argue that beauty apps can be taken as prime examples of how women's bodies and faces are subjected to intense forms of surveillance that offer more fine-grained, metricised, and forensic scrutiny of the female body. Post data collection, these beauty apps give detailed results that are seemingly scientific and are projected as the best solutions that would free women from their troubling skin issues. According to Lupton, apps like these cultivate a self-tracking and self-monitoring culture, which can be understood as a reflexive monitoring of the self by individuals using these digital technologies to collect, monitor, record, and potentially share a range of information about themselves (Lupton, 2014; Gill, 2019). Users give data to these apps in hopes of fitting into the beauty standards created by society, thus echoing the Foucauldian (1977) argument that “women's appearances are always subjected to profound discipline and regulation. In India, the perfection and beauty norms are set by seemingly white ideals of beauty. Where women from margins are coerced into these set notions of Eurocentric, pale-skinned beauty standards. In addition to this, most of these apps promote white, blemish-free faces.

“Women uploading pictures daily to track their skin's progress indulge in constant self-surveillance, which imposes a new disciplinary regime and forms of regulation of women's appearance, implying an intense mode of surveillance. This encourages women to evaluate themselves from both internal and external

perspectives. On one hand, they're motivated to enhance and refine their self-image to become the best possible version of themselves. On the other hand, they're urged to compare themselves with other women.”

- Elias and Gill 2017.

This self-surveillance is also a version of Foucault's panopticon, where users are constantly self-surveilling and are trapped by the beauty standards set by society. Surveillance like this has gradually transitioned to monitoring other parts of women's bodies, with a boost from the ever-growing Femtech industry.

Ida Tin, a Danish entrepreneur, came up with the term Femtech in 2016, which is an umbrella term for products, diagnostics, software, or applications that focus on women's health. For example, Menstruation tracking apps or apps that track women's fertility cycles, and more. Though most Femtech companies have come about as a critical counter response to most health and lifestyle technologies being male-oriented or being embedded with gender bias, these companies have the same profit-driven, market-oriented approach to data security, where “FemTech data –similar to any other health and medical data–is often for sale”. (Mehrnezhad et al. 2022). These applications take unprecedented amounts of data from women, without their explicit consent. According to Mishra and Suresh (2021), governments, healthcare professionals, corporates, and the public are more than ever confronted with the potential and ramifications associated with the nonstop production of “data” about the human body, generated through social media, computers, smartphones, wearable self-tracking devices, GPS systems, and other digital instruments. This data mining of personal data consumers has many pitfalls when it comes to data security and privacy. In India, pervasive data mining by state and corporate actors has become normalized within everyday digital life, disproportionately affecting women and marginalized groups. This normalization limits individual agency over personal data and reinforces existing power hierarchies. Addressing such surveillance requires transparent data practices, enforceable privacy protections, and feminist, rights-based frameworks that foreground consent, accountability, and data sovereignty.

Self-surveillance done through femtech apps like Clue, Maya, Flo, etc., is frequently presented to consumers as a means for them to gain personal advantages. According to Lupton (2014), this could involve sharing their information with others as a form of communal self-tracking or participating in programs where they willingly allow retailers to monitor their shopping habits in exchange for points or rewards. This data is gathered by retailers, who gain insight into their consumer behaviour and enable them to tailor promotions, special offers, and advertisements to individuals. Consequently, the personal data uploaded by participants in these activities is used by third parties for commercial gain. In 2021, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) confirmed that Flo, an app with 100 million users, shared consumer health information with third-party data analytics services despite declaring in its privacy policy that such information would be kept private (Jain and Ahlawat 2022). Similarly, in India, in the year 2019, it was revealed that a femtech called Maya had shared sensitive data of thousands of users regarding their emotional, menstrual, and sexual health and activity with Facebook (Mandavia, 2019).

No criminal charges or civil suits were publicly pursued against Maya following the 2019 data-sharing revelations, reflecting India's then-weak data protection regime. The company responded by modifying its practices. Only with recent data protection laws does India now possess a framework enabling future regulatory enforcement and user remedies.

Even before users had agreed to the app's privacy policy, the app started sharing their data as soon as they installed it. In the Indian context, personal data mined through these apps has gained huge commercial value (Mishra and Suresh 2021).

“However, users are often unaware of how uploading personal data to self-tracking devices or social media platforms poses numerous privacy risks. This data can also be exploited for identity theft, fraudulent health insurance claims, unauthorised access to your personal data, or even for potential blackmail if the information is particularly sensitive, such as sexual identity or activity.”

- Wicks & Chiauzzi, 2015.

Furthermore, apps like these collect data on location, which is not necessary but is stored and sold to third parties for profiteering purposes. To add to scientific Ness and thus legitimise their usage, these apps are built upon the new age predictive analytics, where they use a culmination of data to predict the menstrual cycle and fertility window. This suggests that apps are storing the intimate and reproductive health data, which they proudly boast not to do. To cite an example of this, the Norwegian Consumer Council came across how ten apps, including Clue, handle data collection and sharing. They discovered that these apps share data as a standard part of the digital marketing and ad-tech industry. Norwegian authorities responded with enforcement action under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

“The Norwegian Data Protection Authority (Datatilsynet) began an investigation and issued one of Norway's largest fines against the dating app Grindr for unlawfully sharing sensitive user data without valid consent, a decision which the Norwegian Privacy Appeals Board affirmed on appeal. These actions exemplify Norway's application of GDPR-related instruments to force tech companies to be held responsible for their intrusive data-sharing and poor consent practices, establishing a regulatory trajectory for the regulatory oversight of data exploitation in digital applications. In this industry, large volumes of data are gathered and used to create personalized profiles for each person, all identified by unique markers.”

- Jain and Ahlawat, 2022.

Laws and Data Security

In an increasingly digital world, where personal data is constantly collected, processed, and shared, it becomes important to have laws that protect individuals' privacy. While providing the rights to data ownership, these laws are also needed to provide safety from risks of data abuse. This section analyses the recently enacted data protection laws with a feminist gaze to understand how these laws could affect women in India. Ideally, laws must keep individual privacy at their centre, where the primary aim should be the

protection of individuals from both the state and private players. Ultimately, these laws should be a means to give autonomy and dignity to individuals. Safeguarding individuals, especially women, from discriminatory practices perpetuated through data-driven decision-making thus becomes the need of the hour. With the Indian government's continued efforts to keep up with the constitutional mandate of data privacy under Article 21, there have been a series of bills deliberated upon by the Parliament. After the landmark *K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* case (2017)^{xiii}. When privacy was recognized as a fundamental right, the Justice Srikrishna Committee^{xiii} (established by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY)) proposed the initial draft of the Personal Data Protection (PDP) Bill in 2018. A revised version of the draft was introduced by the government as the PDP Bill (2019), which was later withdrawn, citing the extensive changes made by the Joint Committee of Parliament to it. After a long wait and overhaul, MeitY released a draft of the Digital Personal and Data Protection (DPDP) Bill 2022 for public consultations, which, after Parliament's discussion and President's assent, became the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023.

Provisions under the DPDP Act

This section of the paper will briefly introduce the main provisions of the DPDP Act while also critiquing it through a feminist lens. The law applies to the processing of digital personal data within India, where such data is collected in digital form or in non-digital form and digitised subsequently. It also applies to the processing of personal data outside of India if it is for offering goods or services in India. While exempting personal data processed for any personal purpose or personal data that is made or caused to be made publicly available by-

1. Data Principal^{xiv} to whom such personal data relates; or
2. Any other person who is under a legal obligation to make such personal data publicly available.

As we can see, the exemption being granted in case of personal data is not a defined territory, as the harms of surveillance in the digital age continue to remain too abstract for many people. For example, a user might not understand that the pictures they share on public platforms are not as private and secure as they might think. In a way, by not covering public data, women are at a greater risk of privacy concerns, with far less digital literacy and awareness. The lack of digital literacy is a direct implication of high female disengagement, given the lower digital access women have. This makes them extremely vulnerable at the mercy of big conglomerates; they are almost always unaware of the terms and conditions they agree to and the resultant possible data fraud.

In terms of consent, the act allows the personal data to be processed only for a lawful purpose after obtaining the consent of the Data Principal (who shall have the right to withdraw consent at any time). Also, Consent is not required for 'legitimate uses', including the provision of benefits or services by the government, medical emergencies,

etc. In the case of a child or a person with a disability, consent is provided by the parent or legal guardian.

The law also provides for the Data Protection Board of India, which would look after compliance and imposition of penalties. According to the DPDP Act, compliance is conformity with the statutory obligations placed on data fiduciaries, such as lawful and purpose-limited processing of personal data, obtaining free, specific, informed, and unambiguous consent, implementation of reasonable security safeguards, accuracy and erasure obligations, and the facilitation of data principal rights. Nonetheless, the Act is silent as to the evidentiary standards, compliance benchmarks, and enforcement metrics by which such duties are to be evaluated, making regulatory compliance largely formalistic at best, depending almost entirely on administrative discretion instead of clearly defined legal thresholds. It will also clear the grievances raised by affected persons. Appeals against its decisions will lie with the Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT). The law's provisions of reappointment and a tenure of mere two years raise issues regarding accountability and transparency. Adding to this, the mechanism of appeal against grievances to TDSAT brings forth the question of why a specialised tribunal was not created for intricate matters related to data security.

Data principals under this law will have certain rights and duties. The rights include obtaining information about how their data is processed, seeking correction and erasure of personal data, grievance redressal, and the right to nominate a person to exercise rights in case of death or incapacity. To abide by duty, data principals are required to abstain from registering a false, frivolous complaint and furnishing any false particulars, which, if not abided by, will attract a penalty of up to INR 10,000.

While the act mentions erasure and correction of personal data, it remains silent in terms of an individual's 'Right to be Forgotten'. Worldwide, the 'Right to be Forgotten' has been considered an important tool for self-preservation, especially for the vulnerable. Here Srikrishna Committee has made an important observation and has argued that "Right to be Forgotten, attempts to instill limitation of memory in otherwise limitless digital sphere" (Srikrishna Committee, 2018). While this provision was present in the 2019^{xv} bill, not adding it to the 2023 law has multitudes of ramifications. For example, RTF (Rescue Task Force) could have been used as a tool by survivors of sexual assault who no longer wish to be linked to that traumatic experience to seek their personal information from the internet. Similarly, the Supreme Court in *State of Punjab v. Gurmeet Singh and Ors.*, has echoed this by stating anonymity can help protect victims of sexual offence from social ostracism.

When it comes to Significant Data Fiduciaries (SDF)^{xvi} The law states that the central government may notify any Data Fiduciary as SDF, based on certain factors. This provision gives the central government authority over every citizen's data in terms of which fiduciary has free hand in processing of Indian citizens' data without their explicit

knowledge. In the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, a data fiduciary is:

Any person, company, firm, state entity, or organisation that determines the purpose and means of processing personal data. Additionally, these SDFs are obligated to appoint a data protection officer and an independent data auditor and undertake an impact assessment. We especially want to highlight the exemptions crafted within the law that directly affect the data privacy of Indian citizens. Rights of the data principal and obligations of data fiduciaries^{xvii} (except data security) will not apply in specified cases, including:

- For notified agencies, in the interest of security, sovereignty, public order, etc.;
- For research, archiving, or statistical purposes;
- For start-ups or other notified categories of Data Fiduciaries;
- To enforce legal rights and claims, prevention and investigation of offences;
- To perform judicial or regulatory functions;
- To process in India the personal data of non-residents under foreign contract.

This means the blanket exemption provided by law might create certain loopholes for data processors to exploit the data of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the blanket exemptions under the DPDP Act exempt certain data processing activities from core obligations such as consent, purpose limitation, notice, and data principal rights, except for data security. This suspension of substantive safeguards creates regulatory gaps that disproportionately expose vulnerable and marginalised groups—particularly women—to heightened risks of surveillance, misuse, and data exploitation. Collection, processing, and usage of data in the digital world are embedded with the same existing structural biases as in the real world. As stated by Dubrofsky and Magnet, all forms of data collection have imperatives built in (Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015, xii) that serve the interests of those in power.

A Call for a Gender-Just Data Privacy Law. Post *Puttaswamy*, India's legal discourse on privacy has undergone a profound transformation. The law discussed above can be understood as an outcome of the Supreme Court's forward-looking constitutional vision, which firmly established state accountability for the protection of individual privacy. The *Puttaswamy* judgment is widely regarded as a watershed moment in Indian constitutional history, as it unequivocally recognised privacy as a fundamental right intrinsic to dignity, autonomy, and personal liberty, reshaping the relationship between the citizen and the state.

The Internet Freedom Foundation argues that “The fundamental right to privacy was further cemented as the Supreme Court acknowledged its application across the golden triangle of the Indian Constitution, i.e., fundamental rights to equality and dignity (Article 14), speech and expression (Article 19), and life and liberty (Article 21).” (IFF 2022) The law in question, since its inception, has attracted many forms of criticism. Apar Gupta, for example, states that “ Given the vague nature of the Data Act, it will appeal more to a

partisan than a constitutionalist since trust is based on allegiance to a favoured political ideology rather than a rights-based law”. (Gupta, 2023) Here, we can fairly argue that the law is indeed a content-based piece of legislation. Where “under a content-based model the data controller is free to use, process and share the data with any third parties, once the consent of the user is obtained” (“Data Protection & Privacy Issues in India” 2017). A rights-based model, on the other hand, would have given users greater rights over his/her data while requiring the data controller to ensure that such rights of the users are not breached. This could lead to greater autonomy of the users over their personal data. Given the importance of privacy concerns in the lives of people, the enacted law should have been one on the lines of a rights-based model. This would have empowered citizens with their own data handling decisions. However, giving the law the benefit of doubt and considering the evolving nature of India's democratic landscape, many people have argued that the law will be fine-tuned gradually and will become a better one. Commenting on this, Gupta (2023) states that “this is magical thinking as it ignores the democratic backsliding in a digital India.” Further, Amrita Johri and Anjali Bhardwaj^{xviii} state that the law “threatens the very foundations of transparency and accountability” owed to the citizens by the nation state.

“Cataloguing these and many other overarching criticisms, this paper has tried to collate and open up the debates around the provisions of this law to add a gendered perspective to it. The laws in India have often acted as a catalyst for social change and have accelerated the pace at which equality is ushered into society. The laws being crafted around the issues concerning the privacy of individuals and their data should also follow this pattern. Being a harbinger of gender equality, these laws should also take into consideration the discrimination and marginalization that have existed in this society. To tackle this, the law needs to be gender responsive, which involves crafting and putting into action policies that take gender-specific aspects of society into account. This is also about making sure that injustices and discrimination are not perpetuated in the digital world.”

- Chair, 2020.

“In a globalised world, where technologies have been made into products which continuously seek 'new markets', South Asian countries have become consumers' go-to market, as they were historically. This is also the case with the femtech companies seeking expansion of their user base when it comes to women of the global south. People of the third world have been historically dehumanised; we believe that this is being continued through how the data is being collected and processed every second. People and their lived experiences have been reduced to numbers to make it easier for that data to be interpreted, analysed, and surveilled.”

- Stanley, 2012

This, according to Denise Farran, is called the sociological vanishing trick, wherein the uniqueness and experience of people is sieved through a classificatory schema, where people become “mere numbers” (Farran 2013) and as a result are dehumanised. The law and the companies using these numerous forms of surveillance need to be sensitised to the fact that on the other side of these numbers are actual human beings, who might end up facing the ramifications of this extensive digitization they are indulging in to garner

more and more profit. There being that respectability, it is important here to differentiate between the role of the law and of corporate actors. If companies are putting surveillance into action via data harvesting, analysis, profit motives in technology and technological systems, then the law is in the role of normative framework through which these actions are made to operate, that is it legitimizes, regulates, or restrains these practices. Both thus must be attuned to the implications that datafication brings human beings--because indifference and the will of regulators or corporate imperatives alike cause real harm to individuals whose lives are turned into an easy read only for efficiency, governance, or profit purposes.

As stated in the previous section of this paper, to reiterate, Mehrnezhad et al. (2022) data is often up for sale. According to Li (2021), the majority of femtech start-ups worldwide primarily originate from and are headquartered in Europe or North America, with minimal representation from other global regions. Connecting this westernised data processing structure with the DPDP 2023, which allows for the transfer of citizens' personal data to the global north without a strong evaluation mechanism, works against the benefit of women in India. Not having any checks or balances built into the law, like explicit consent, where people are reminded of the risks involved with sharing any data right before doing so, is a missed opportunity that could have prevented potential harm. The internet has the potential to become a volatile and unsafe space, especially for vulnerable groups. Any law that aims to protect its citizens from data misuse needs to take into consideration that real-life socio-economic or cultural disadvantages are translated online, making marginalised sections equally vulnerable on digital platforms. Doctrinally, offline socio-economic and cultural disadvantage is translated into online vulnerability when data protection law fails to provide heightened safeguards for contextually sensitive information, thereby allowing disclosure or misuse of personal data to result in disproportionate, legally cognisable harms such as discrimination, loss of dignity, and threats to personal liberty. For example, if a person belonging to the LGBTQ+ community ends up as a victim of a data breach, their identities becoming public could cause devastation in their real-life. Sensitive personal data like sexual orientation, sex life, caste, tribe, religion, or political opinion were protected under the umbrella term "personal sensitive data " in 2019, which has not appeared in the DPDP 2023. A special category of Personal Sensitive data requires higher compliance and thus more explicit consent, which would prohibit the use of sensitive data in matters of employment and cases of potential significant harm. The law also needs to consider intersecting realities of caste, class, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation, thus creating a pathway for horizontal equality.

Globally, there are laws in place that uphold some great standards of data protection, which could be considered as groundwork for building a gender just data protection law in India. We will be looking at the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union and contrasting it with DPDP 2023 in terms of data protection and gender sensitivity. If there is a data breach on the European Union's territory, corporations are bound by law to notify the breach within 72 hours and potentially to the affected data

subjects. Whereas in India, there is no such time regulation for notifying authorities, even in cases where sensitive data is compromised. The European law has specific mechanisms for transferring data to third-party countries; the same cannot be said for its Indian counterpart, which does not identify any transfer mechanisms for transferring personal data. This has resulted in data of Indian citizens being fully in the state's control in terms of cross-border transfer. The state, seemingly acting in its own interests, regulates this transfer on a case-by-case basis without having a structured, transparent procedure. Under the GDPR, cross-border data flows are controlled by well-organized legal mechanisms, namely adequacy decisions, standard contractual clauses (SCCs), binding corporate rules (BCRs), and express informed consent of data subjects. These mechanisms also impose meaningful responsibilities on data exporters and importers, secure rights for individuals to be enforced, and allow for the transfers to occur under independent regulatory control. On the other hand, an executive-led and discretionary framework of the Indian DPDP Act operates where cross-border transfers are authorised or restricted through the government notification process, with no discernible criteria or procedural guarantee. Adopting structured models such as the GDPR, it seems that India's data governance may be transformed from a discretionary rule over data to one based on rules. This would make information control more open and fairer. More importantly, such mechanisms will facilitate gender-sensitive regulation by incorporating risk assessments, transparency, and actionable remedies into data flow, which would prevent disproportionate harms to women and marginalised minorities who tend to misuse the data. Thus, effective regulation needs to take the practice out of the realm of sovereign rule and give precedence to rights-based, transparent, and context-aware mechanisms against cross-border processing of data.

Though GDPR, just like many other data privacy laws, can perpetuate gender bias and discrimination because it relies on historical data that may contain bias. For example, algorithms used in decision-making processes can reflect and amplify existing gender disparities, which would in turn lead to unequal treatment. Thus, it is the need of our time to have a gender just, robust data privacy and regulation law and policy frameworks, which would aid India's rapid and hopefully gender sensitive digitization.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have delved into the complex landscape of surveillance, data privacy, and the urgent need for a gender-sensitive data privacy law in India. Surveillance has been defined in multiple ways. In recent years, it has been contextualised to understand the ever-increasing complexities that the new digital world has introduced. We have tried to understand how surveillance has taken place on Indian women's bodies and has been normalised and carried over into the digital realms. Using a feminist gaze, we have consciously opted to understand and analyse the ramifications of surveillance, dataveillance and self-surveillance on women and other minorities and the commodification of their data. The implications of this digital surveillance are far-reaching, with real-life consequences for individuals, particularly women. For instance,

we have seen cases where sensitive personal data, once leaked or misused, can lead to devastating outcomes, including blackmail, social shame, and a loss of individual agency. This paper has also sought to address the gap in existing critiques of the new data protection law 2023 by contextualising them through a feminist lens while simultaneously highlighting the need for a gender-just law and for the government to be vigilant and protect its citizens online. We believe that marginalised individuals often face compounded discrimination, and data protection measures should consider these intersecting vulnerabilities. In conclusion, we want to highlight that the State's role in data protection and privacy should catalyze the initiation and build strong digital spaces that equally benefit all citizens of the country.

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Educating for Activism – Empowering ‘Lowered-Caste’ Girls Trapped in Patriarchy and Deprivation

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Abstract: The article discusses how gender, caste, and extreme socio-economic deprivation intersect to shape the lives of lower-caste street girls in North India. The paper builds on a rich narrative case study and long-term experiential engagement within a non-formal educational context to promote educating for activism as a transformative pedagogical paradigm. Incorporating insights rooted in psychology, feminist pedagogy, and social action theory, it identifies other-oriented empathy, moral identity, and a sense of community as critical predictors of social action behaviour. Examining school-based interventions, such as performing arts, community service, and sustained in-service teacher training, reveals how educational institutions can operate as spaces of healing, resistance, and agency for traumatized children. It is therefore clear that caste- and gender-responsive education is crucial, not only for inclusion and developing skills, but for cultivating dignity, critical consciousness, and a capacity for sustained social change in India’s most marginalised girls.

Keywords: Educating for Activism; Gender and Caste; Street Children; Feminist Pedagogy; Social Action Behaviour; Marginalisation; Empathy and Moral Identity; Teacher Training

Introduction

Pooja was 15 when she died; the reason was unknown. She grew up on the streets of the North Indian city Varanasi, where she lived with her violent and (also sexually) abusive parents and 6 siblings. Three months before her death, he kidnapped her from the boarding home where she had by then lived for 5 years and blossomed into a smart, confident girl. Pooja wanted to get an education, but her father had already sold her off and taken an advance payment. Now he needed to make good on his sale by supplying the “goods”. After forcefully bringing Pooja from Varanasi to her village near Sonbhadra, the mother and aunt tricked her into drinking liquor (by telling her it was self-made, and would not be strong at all), making her drunk. When she was almost unconscious and defenceless, they brought her to the hut where her husband-to-be lived. Pooja's mother, herself a regular victim of physical and sexual assaults by her husband, assumed that once Pooja was raped, she would stop resisting the marriage. The boy's family thought that it would be good for him to “give her a try, in case he might like another girl better after all. Pooja was raped that night and afterwards left in front of the boy's hut. She managed to get back to her parents, who made her beg with her little twin brothers so that she could prove useful until the designated day of the marriage. All the time, she was closely guarded by her mother.

After three weeks of verbal and physical abuse, Pooja managed to steal money from her mother and take a bus back to Varanasi, to the security of her boarding home. For three months after that, she did not open up to anyone about the rape. She was worried her secret boyfriend in Varanasi would, as a consequence, reject her and hold her responsible for the rape. Pooja had heard him talk badly before about another girl who had been raped and feared he wouldn't show compassion. When she started getting fevers and became weaker and weaker, an odyssey to doctors and hospitals began, with no clear results, yet no doctor took a real interest in her case. As her condition deteriorated, she finally told me that she had been raped at the time of the abduction. I did not want to push her and assumed there would be time to speak once she recovered. It was our last real conversation. She died in the I.C.U., with only me by her side; her family had already declared her dead after she fled from them.

Like Pooja, numerous street girls from the scheduled castes learn early on that, as females, they are valued less than boys, and positioned at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They are exposed to gossip, humiliation, and violence and learn to avoid eye contact, endure parental abuse, and redirect aggression toward younger siblings. The damages to their psychological well-being and self-esteem are often severe, such that imagining change for themselves or their communities becomes nearly impossible. The daily struggle for survival further limits their capacity to envision alternative futures. The additional daily struggle to survive on the street and in the dirt does not let them even dream of a positive change. Trying to help girls like Pooja merely gain academic knowledge is not sufficient. It neither enables them to develop self-awareness and confidence, nor allows them to cultivate a critical understanding of the unjust structures shaping their social environment. Empowering girls and boys to overcome the immense obstacles that require moving beyond traditional goals of schooling and toward the cultivation of active, critically engaged citizens. We, therefore, need to equip children with the capacities needed to recognise and challenge injustice. As a society, examining how we educate the young represents a critical starting point for social change.

Consequently, in this chapter, I want to take you on a journey of how schools, as the one institution almost all girls and boys come into contact with, can achieve exactly that: Raise strong children that inspire and accomplish social change. How can we teach lowered-caste^{xix} Street children navigate their traumatic childhood experiences, develop a sense of community among themselves, and become activists.

The Social Context: Deprivation and Gender

In India, despite considerable progress over the last 30 years, the rights of girls and women are still regularly violated. Structural, physical, and psychological violence pervades their lives, sometimes even taking away their opportunity to live. For every 10 males, there are only 9 females (Niti Aayog, 2021), hinting at a huge gender bias leading to femicide on a large scale. If the girl survives this early sex selection, she is less likely to get the nourishment she would need for adequate intellectual development (Aurino et

al., 2019). Much more often than boys, young girls are made to do household chores for several hours every day, while boys are much more able to roam around and play freely. Thus, many girls get robbed of their childhood while their families profit from their labour (Agrawal, 2013). Technology tools like mobiles and computers are often male property (ASER, 2021), which, during the current Covid-19 pandemic, meant that a girl would be less likely to participate in online learning (UNICEF India Country office, 2020). She could grow up to be one out of four girls who get married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2021), a shocking reality that got exacerbated due to the pandemic, too: “Vigilance is the key to prevention, but the virus has ripped away this safety net” (Lal, 2021, p. 84). Even if the girl is not getting married off as a child, her chances of obtaining a secondary or tertiary education are, again, lower than those of boys (Annual Status of Education Report, 2016). Once she gets married and, thus, finds herself in a socially acceptable position, she is highly likely to be physically or sexually assaulted by her husband (Ler et al., 2020).

The ongoing inequality described here is considerably aggravated if a girl is part of a ‘lower caste’. Both categories used by the government (scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and are recognized as ‘historically deprived’ by the Constitution^{xx}. The deeply intertwined notion of impurity creates a social reality for lower-caste girls that is quite unlike that of a girl from a higher caste. A scheduled-caste girl like Pooja, suffering from the “triple burden of economic deprivation, patriarchy, and caste- and untouchability-based discrimination” (Sabarwhal & Sonalkar, 2015), lives in a completely different world than a girl from a privileged background. One has to acknowledge that all over India, a cultural shift has indeed happened, and today, educating girls has become a major concern of households of all castes and socio-economic backgrounds. However, getting an education might mean different things to girls from different castes. For a lower-caste girl from the scheduled castes, the whole process of schooling is much more conflicted. Schools, including the ones catering to the elites, are “inherently casteist spaces” (Naraharisetty, 2021). Since in India, the surname often gives away the caste, everyone in class gets constantly reminded of the social hierarchy. Verbal abuse is rampant, with many teachers expecting lower-caste students to fail easily. Scheduled caste girls are much more likely to be physically or sexually violated, too, with less protection offered to them by the often-higher caste teachers and principals who are meant to protect them. Persisting despite all these obstacles and getting an education might then even worsen marriage prospects: While higher-caste girls on average gain the aura of respectability when having finished their studies (Khoja-Moolji, 2018), lower-caste girls might have more troubles than anticipated. Their marriage prospects might, surprisingly, worsen because they suddenly find themselves overeducated. Let’s circle back from this rather broad picture of girls who are lower-caste and economically deprived to our girl, Pooja. Pooja, who was not allowed to even finish her studies because she died way before that, is a disheartening example of this triple burden. However, she is only one of many. Pooja belongs to a scheduled tribe family that resides with other distantly related families in tents along the non-developed banks of the Ganges. They call themselves “*Daikar*” (officially,

Dharikar), and are a tribe now scattered all over East Uttar Pradesh and even Bihar and Jharkhand. In 1964, they were forcefully evicted from their original village, *Pipri*, in *Sonbhadra* district. According to the narrations of the elders, the flooding of the Rihand dam happened unannounced. It resulted in the displacement of over 200,000 people (Parshuram, 2000, p.36). Since that time, the tribals have not lived together as one community.

Traditionally, the *Daikars* are involved in bamboo craft, which does not provide them with the means of sustaining a livelihood anymore. Many move to cities like Varanasi, Faridabad, or Ghazipur to gain daily employment work as rickshaw pullers or construction workers. The mothers often go begging. Adults living in the illegal slum close to the school almost inevitably become alcoholics by the age of 25, regardless of their sex. Most children below the age of two are breastfed and, thus, take in alcohol that has passed into their mother's breastmilk. Fertility and mortality rates are much higher than elsewhere, with 6-7 children per family and approximately one in four children dying before they reach the age of 10^{xxi}. Absence from school is high because parents move away from Varanasi quite often to (a) travel to other cities for employment, or (b) pay extended visits to their villages with their kids. This decreases the likelihood of them completing their education.

98% of the parents residing in that temporary settlement are illiterate. Their children experience physical and psychological violence daily, many so severely that they are emotionally and behaviourally disorganized when they start their schooling. Most of the abuse is inflicted by the parents themselves, while many also report violence from older siblings or uncles. This coincides with findings of the *Study on Child Abuse in India* (2007), where in 88,5 % of all enumerated abuse cases, one of the parents was the perpetrator (p.47). In this context, it is illustrative to realize that this is not an "Indian", but rather a state-related phenomenon, since in Goa, for example, only 19 % of the physical abuse suffered by children is caused by family members (ibid.).

It needs to be emphasized that children who are so neglected, many will suffer from behavioural disorders, which directly translates into a high level of violent acts by students. Their frustration tolerance, affection control, and the ability to reflect or think critically are very low. Additionally, almost all street children struggle with various academic issues resulting from developmental delays, such as stuntism, low working memory skills, badly developed fine-motor skills, and attention deficits. Of course, not all children are subject to all developmental delays to an equal extent or intensity, and it is hard to retrospectively judge the specific impact of their previous malnourishment, parental alcohol intake, and maltreatment. However, most children appear 2-4 years younger than their actual age, so it can be safely said that there *is* a clear negative overall impact.

Both girls and boys are vulnerable to abuse and are likely to drop out of school, but the dimensions and reasons vary according to gender. At an early age, both genders face a

similar risk of being sexually exploited or molested. When adolescence approaches, often already before that, the balance tips over: Girls are often seen as an unwanted liability to the family and get married off at an early age (around 14 years). When they get older, it is more likely that they will be sexually abused and their workforce exploited. The girls lack a feeling of self-efficacy and confidence, and sense that they will be victims all their lives, although they usually don't understand the extent of it. Conversations with mothers living on the street confirm the suspicion that the abuse continues: Marital consensual sexual relations are almost non-existent, and are replaced by spousal rape instead.

If boys drop out of school, it is most often voluntarily because they feel the urge to earn money and/or consume drugs (at 10 years of age, most of the street boys are already addicted to chewing tobacco and betelnut). Girls are much more often forced to quit school. The school rules and regulations, which many boys find hard to follow, actually provide a feeling of freedom for girls, who usually spend their days looking after their siblings. These experiences coincide with Uma Kambhampati and Raji Rajan's (2007) finding that “the presence of very young siblings in the household worsens the probability of girls going to school” (p. 1309).

These intersecting forms of harm can be further understood through Johan Galtung's concept of cultural violence, which refers to the symbolic and normative processes through which direct and structural violence are rendered acceptable, invisible, or morally justified. Practices such as child marriage, caste-based humiliation, and sexual exploitation of lower-caste girls are sustained not only through physical force or economic deprivation, but through deeply internalized beliefs about purity, gender roles, and social worth. An intersectional lens is therefore essential to this analysis, as caste, gender, and poverty do not operate as separate axes of disadvantage but mutually reinforce one another in shaping the lived realities of lower-caste street girls. Recognizing these intersecting and culturally normalized forms of violence helps explain why deprivation is so persistent and why educational interventions must address not only access and skills, but also the underlying belief systems that sustain inequality.

Educating for Activism

When working with extremely vulnerable children, it is important to keep in mind how helpless they feel when thinking of the complexities of the system they will have to survive in. The work for those in the educational sector seems to be cut out: Teaching girls – and boys, for that matter – that change is possible. Boys, too, will be members of the girls' community and, given the patriarchal structures, powerful ones at that. Hence, our responsibility is not to raise women activists alone, but female and male activists who are both aware of and feel strongly about human rights.

When trying to detect ways of helping to raise the girls that will shape India's future, it is sensible to dive into prior research first. How can existing psychological approaches to volunteerism and activism be applied and adapted to education in such an adverse

environment? How can we as educators, researchers, or activists become successful at fulfilling the immense task of empowering girls who are economically deprived, considered untouchable, and trapped by patriarchy? What is it that we have to teach, and how do we do that?

In the 1990s, psychologists started focusing on volunteerism and activism as distinct kinds of helping behaviour (Clary & Snyder, 1991; Flanagan et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1990). Volunteerism and activism were often understood as dissimilar. Where the former describes engagement in specific helping actions over a certain period of time, the latter is viewed as campaigning to promote political or social change. Where volunteering would quite often be benefiting on a micro-level scale, namely, individuals and movements, activism is understood to aim at structural change in larger communities or society as a whole. Political awareness and participation might not be needed for volunteering, but definitely for activism. There is a considerable “overlap in the nature and scope of volunteer and activist activities” (CIVICUS, 2008, p.3). Social scientists often describe both activism and volunteering as *social action*, meaning “behaviours that people engage in that benefit other individuals, movements, larger communities, and the societies in which they are embedded” (Snyder & Omoto, 2008, p. 2).

Antecedents of social action behaviour can be broadly categorised into (a) the ability to understand and respond to others' needs and (b) long-standing dispositions (Stukas et al., 2015). The first category points towards the role of empathy and developing a sense of community, while the second encompasses constructs such as personality traits, attachment types, and moral identity. Since schools have little power over shaping the personalities or attachment types of their students, it makes sense to work on those factors that positively influence social action and have been identified as shapable: Other-oriented empathy, moral identity, and sense of community.

Empathy. Firstly, empathy is described as the “affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and which is identical or very similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel” (Eisenberg et al., 2006, p. 642). That an empathic person would be better disposed to display volunteering behaviour seems an ostensible connection to make. Hence, the mixed results of its actual effects are quite surprising: Several studies found low correlations between empathy and being or continuing to be a volunteer (Davila, 2009; Einolf, 2008). While empathy in its broadness “may not always be a guiding influence on helping” (Stukas, Snyder, and Clary, 2014, p.6), *other-oriented* empathy can more accurately predict volunteers' length of service, time spent volunteering, and the number of organizations served (ibid., p.7). Other-oriented empathy transcends the general empathy definition by adding the feeling of “responsibility for, and concern about, the well-being of others” (Finkelstein et al., 2005, p. 409). It is this other-oriented empathy that an institution must be able to stimulate and strengthen to increase the likelihood of its clients growing up to become socially active. Although individual differences tend to

be relatively stable over time, there is evidence that empathy can be taught through interventions (e.g., Gerdes et al., 2011; Warren & Lessner, 2014).

Moral Identity. Secondly, developing moral identity has been repeatedly linked to social action behaviour (Allen & Rushton, 1983; Porter, 2013). The study of moral development was profoundly shaped by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984), who distinguished between adolescents and adults (a) internalizing valued adult role models (conventional morality), or (b) using internal judgment based on self-chosen principles for moral reasoning (post-conventional morality). Blasi (1981) criticized that this cognitive-developmental perspective could not explain the gap between moral reasoning and moral action in real life, where a person with a well-developed sense of morality can and, more or less often, does act contrary to his moral convictions. Blasi argued that “considerations of self that ultimately lead to a defined moral identity” (Derryberry et al., 2009, p. 202) were needed to bridge this moral action gap. Though its concrete content may vary across cultures (Graham et al., 2012), moral identity can be broadly defined as a “self-schema organized around a set of moral traits” (Reed et al., 2015, p. 437). These traits can be dispositions such as being fair, honest, or kind. There is a clear distinction between empathy and morality that needs to be kept in mind in order to appreciate how both constructs influence behaviour differently. Feeling and responding empathically does not automatically entail a moral component, even though the resulting behaviour might be prosocial. As Blasi emphasises, “concerns and emotions become moral when they are inserted into a special perspective, the perspective of moral goodness, that transforms their naturalness and spontaneity into cultivated intentions” (Blasi, 1999, p. 13).

Sense of community. As a last predictor of social action, I will look at ‘sense of community’ because involvement in one's community is usually based on a quite deeply felt attachment to a “specific group of individuals and the associated shared responsibility for the functioning of this group” (Novotný, 2013, p.64). Omoto and Snyder (2010) propose that this sense of community leads to sensations of self-efficacy and support. A person would feel obliged and responsible to help and would be confident, too, that their help can achieve a substantial change (Omoto & Snyder, 2010, p. 229). Being thus motivated and feeling empowered, people should, in return, get motivated to become socially active – and there seems to be “clear evidence that motivations reflecting concern for community figure prominently in these decisions” (ibid., p. 231).

Looking at the profiles of volunteers globally, the chances of socially and economically marginalized children getting involved in social action are low if they don't finish their schooling: It is usually people with a high level of education who take part in social action as defined above (among many others, Dreier, 2012; Scott, 2013; Shernock, 1986). Street children, on the other hand, possess a high drop-out risk as their parents, in general, do not share the sentiment that completing high school matters. So far, none of the street children I know has been able to continue living on the street and pass grade 2. All former street children who are still at primary and secondary school live permanently at a boarding home. Since seats are limited, only a small minority of these scheduled caste

students will be able to finish their studies. The huge and sometimes demeaning impact of developmental delays and under-stimulation at a young age adds another obstacle to learning. In my experience, street children read less fluently, retain knowledge with more difficulty, and find their memorizing skills below those of children from higher socio-economic strata. Hence, they have to work harder and invest more time and effort into keeping up with performance expectations at the Secondary level. I fear that up to 20% of current Elementary students could not continue studying beyond grade 8, even if allowed to.

Another obstacle to becoming a volunteer or activist lies in the difficulty of making sense of a traumatic childhood. Although the capacity for other-oriented empathy, as mentioned above, is not a fixed personality trait and can be increased through intervention, it is nonetheless shaped by attachment patterns in early childhood. Mary Ainsworth (1965, 1967, 1978) understood attachment as an affectional bond that unites two people over time and across space. According to Ross Thompson (2013), one of Ainsworth's most influential contributions was the view that “infants develop security based on their prior experiences of sensitive, helpful, responsive care” (p. 6). Highly insensitive, violent, or inconsistent care increases the risk of an insecure attachment. Among middle-class samples, about one third is considered to be insecurely attached, while, shockingly, this proportion might triple among lower-income families (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 1999). Disorganized attachment, as the most harmful of insecure attachments, is considered to be an indicator of an “experience of stress and anxiety which the child cannot resolve because the parent is at the same time the source of fright as well as the only potential haven of security” (ibid., p. 226). In contradiction to other forms of insecure attachment, the correlation between parental insensitivity and infant disorganization is quite low. Instead, maltreatment and the exposure to continuous marital conflict are the predictors of disorganized attachment (ibid., p. 243). Thus, it can be safely presumed that the proportion of street children with a disorganized attachment is considerably higher than in an average school setting.

The security of attachment has a great impact on the development of positive personality characteristics and more advanced emotion understanding (Thompson, 2013, p. 2). If our students have a higher risk of developing a disorganized or insecure attachment, they will, in addition, face more difficulties in developing other-oriented empathy – and, therefore, be less likely than the average student to become a social activist later on.

When teaching about activism, it is essential to frame the pedagogy through an approach to work with trauma-affected, deprived and socially excluded children. Activism must not be presented as an obligation, a burden of morality but as a gradual possibility rooted in safety and self-worth. As girls who challenge caste and gender standards may be scorned by their parents or community, a need for awareness about collective action, discretion and safeguarding oneself is paramount. Trauma-informed teaching is vital, because premature contact with social injustice can overwhelm emotionally insecure students. Schools are therefore required to set realistic goal-based targets that work

towards developing agency, empathy, and sense of belonging and not structural transformation.

The Role of the School

In my experience as an educator and teacher trainer in a North Indian tier 2 city, most schools do not have education towards social action on their day-to-day agenda. The school I worked in was striving to become an exception^{xxii}. Over the years, we have tried several extra-curricular activities and events to promote positive change in students and/or teachers. Taking the three predictors of social action behaviour from above – sense of community, other-oriented empathy, moral identity –, let us take a look at what can work in a school setting.

Performing arts. Theatre has been widely used as a method to increase the empathy skills of students (Bhukhanwala, 2014; Pataki & Mackenzie, 2012). By becoming actors, students, or professionals take on the challenging task of stepping into someone else's shoes, trying to truly understand their feelings, fears, and joys. In the process, they develop the cognitive and emotional understanding of other people's situations that it takes to feel responsible for their well-being.

Various forms of theatre having social issues at its core have been used to actively involve students in public functions. Performing arts have been taught threefold: (1) Weekly dance classes work on pieces that mix modern and traditional Indian and Western dancing with drama elements, while (2) school functions have been reorganized to be events of liberation and education, not self-glorification or self-promotion, as seems to be normally the case. Theatre students create new pieces at least twice a year, for example, on the topics such as superstitions, alcoholism, or discrimination against girls. (3) Forum theatre events based on Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*^{xxiii} took place, revolving around topics chosen by our students, who were actors and audience at the same time. One topic was the difference in expectations between what is supposed to be normal behaviour for boys and girls respectively. The second play dramatized the oppression of people living on the street by shop owners, who would not allow them to use public handpumps in front of their shops. The last play we had was on the discrimination based on skin colour in India.

Throughout their schooling years, students, thus, get encouraged to look at various problems of their society, recognize the underlying structural violence, and develop ways for positive change. Through reflecting on social issues at hand, students learn to take other people's places and, in the process, develop other-oriented empathy, which is such an important predictor of future social action behaviour.

Community service. In order to keep hierarchies as low as possible, we do not employ cleaning staff. We believe that those who dirty something should clean it themselves. All students starting have certain duties at school. Each class is responsible for its own

classroom, and the children take turns cleaning the bathrooms. Apart from our bathrooms always being considerably clean (a huge achievement in itself, compared to how dirty school toilets usually are), the biggest advantage of this system seems to be the sense of ownership that students develop. They state it creates a feeling of being an equal part of their school community^{xxiv}. Apart from these daily cleaning activities, we celebrate helping behaviour by inviting all students and teachers to join in public feedings. We cook and serve a nutritious lunch to the whole neighbourhood. We also host garbage competitions where teams of students compete to collect the highest amount of garbage. Additionally, some classes are assigned one hour of community service per week during school time. They use this time to separate and sell waste, help reorganize learning aids, prepare decorations for upcoming events, or do garden work. These students, too, report an increase in sense of community and moral identity: They say that doing community work makes them feel that the school is ‘theirs’ and they are important parts of it. Some also mentioned how they are grateful to learn to help out, and that they wish that everyone would have to contribute to the community like that.

More opportunities to actively serve their community arise through the many emergencies in the slum. Whenever a student or a relative gets admitted in hospital, there needs to be continuous caretaking. The adults residing on the street often are not able to fulfil these duties, as they are either too uneducated, too afraid of doctors or nurses, or too drunk. Here, the students of the boarding home help out – and feel proud of their contribution. The feeling of being needed and being able to help creates a sense of agency and self-efficacy. Students who have participated in outreach programmes like hospital visits reported a sense of urgency and community that motivates them in this voluntary activity.

In-service teacher trainings. In view of the relatively low qualifications of available local teachers, continuous in-service teacher training is a definite must in order to obtain quality improvement. Weekly workshops for teachers equip them with child-focused teaching methods and classroom management strategies. Although most teachers teaching in NGO schools hold at least a B.A.-level degree, their scope of understanding and reflective or critical thinking is quite restricted. Belonging to the lower middle classes, their own educational experiences at school and university are limited to rote learning, experiences of teacher violence, and gender discrimination. During training as well as daily teaching at school, we stress the role of creating a secure attachment between students and teachers. Of course, teachers refrain from the common and openly voiced labelling of our children as “low”, “dirty”, “untouchable”, or “animal-like”. However, many planned and unplanned discussions with teachers revolve around the subtleties of prejudice and stigma, because caste- or class-related teacher-student conflicts do occur. Quite often, teachers, as part upper caste, are insensitive towards their own privilege. They perceive themselves as non-prejudiced, and resolve to project, rationalize, and employ other mechanisms of suppression when ‘accused’ of showing discriminatory behaviour. It is a challenging process for teachers to become sensitive and loving caretakers of our children. By implication, it is then even more difficult for our students to develop secure attachments to their teachers.

As most of the children have insecure or disorganized attachments to their parents, and in light of the immense role that secure attachment plays for the development of empathy, it is of utmost importance for teachers be able to model empathy to our students. So far, there is a huge gap between claim and reality. This gap between the ideal and practice of teacher behaviour is also true for gender issues. Victim blaming and shaming, subtle sexist language, condoning of physical violence, and adhering to traditional gender-differentiated norms of behaviour are all examples of the mindset of teachers who lack an understanding of gender equality. It starkly contrasts with superficial slogans like “all girls should study” or “we treat everyone equally”. Of course, in the context of sex and gender, cultural differences need to be kept in mind, too, as they quite often are used to silence reflective and dissenting voices: attempts from my side at addressing gender discrimination might be – and, sometimes, are perceived as imposing Western culture.

In light of this complex, conflicting, and interwoven net of cultural, societal, and personal experiences of teachers and students, a weekly meeting of the teachers was a game-changer for us. I strongly argue for Indian schools to give up Saturdays as teaching days. In my experience, the time that student’s study less is of no consequence. On the contrary, as soon as the teachers’ learnings of the teachers transfer to their teaching, the students profit from their ‘free’ Saturdays, both personally and academically. Of course, this only holds if the implementation of training content can be ensured by the leadership. While the students certainly could use two days a week to rest and just be children, Saturdays would be very useful for in-service teacher workshops. Here, teachers could develop qualities that are crucial to our students, too (other-oriented) empathy, moral identity, and a sense of community.

Assessing the outcomes. Although all described measures seem to positively influence a sense of community, other-oriented empathy, and/ or moral identity to some degree, the low frequency of these events begs attention. Forum and dance theatre have both shown to creatively engage students in activism, with all the predictors of social action getting triggered. In spite of their great potential, they have been used sparingly. This, in part, is because of staff and time constraints, but also because their potential so far has been underestimated. Therefore, one recommendation is to design forum and dance theatre programmes in ways that enable more students to participate. Forum theatre will, in any case, involve the whole school, or even slum community during the presentation.

A clear deficit that is emerging when rethinking education as it is currently practised is the relatively low degree of attachment between teachers and students. Of course, this result needs to be put into context: A clear no-violence policy and regular student-teacher communication opportunities have resulted in an overall positive school atmosphere. As stated above, to initiate developments of empathy, a secure attachment to a caregiver is needed. Since the parents of our children are unable to take that place, our teachers have a bigger responsibility than the average teacher who deals with children from relatively stable families. Therefore, even if the relationships between our teachers and students are more personal and trusting than in other schools, there is still much left to be done.

Clearly, teachers need anti-prejudice and empathy-instilling interventions that work better than the focus-group discussions that have been tried out so far. They themselves could be actively involved in forum theatre projects. Through this method, it might be possible to allow teachers to make subtle prejudices and gender discriminations explicit.

The oldest girls I have worked with are now studying at the university level. However, when talking to them, it seems that the measures undertaken at school have been at least partially successful. Out of three college-going students, two describe prosocial career paths: Jaya eventually wants to move back to her area of origin near Sonbhadra and wants to open a school for the underprivileged. Shabnam, who had started taekwondo while still at school, wants to open a taekwondo centre in which students from low socio-economic backgrounds would be able to study for free. Interestingly, the third student who wants to become an artist and doesn't show real interest in social activism or volunteering, belongs to a high caste family that happens to be so poor to have to live on the street (of course, separating themselves both physically and verbally from other street people).

Talking to other girls who have now finished their high school and are about to enter professional or University education, all of them feel an obligation to their community in bringing about change. If not large-scale, then at least through their own lives. By getting on their own feet, studying well, and earning good money, these girls believe that they will eventually be able to give back to their communities. However, in the eyes of their immediate and extended families, they are now highly educated, they are often sought out to give advice even at their young ages^{xxv}.

Conclusion

Deprivation, gender, and caste create such a heavy burden for girls that significantly constrains their ability to navigate social realities and foster, feeling of powerlessness. If movement changing towards a more just society is to be achieved, schools must implement programmes, policies, and routines that foster social action behaviour in students.

For Pooja, the support provided by the school came too late. Her death remains a tragic reminder of the violence faced by many lower-caste girls. At the same time, it reinforces the urgency of creating an educational environment in which even the most vulnerable children can survive and grow. While Pooja has died, her girlfriends are now becoming young adults who aspire to contribute to a more just future for their communities.

This paper demonstrates that student's engagement in social action is closely linked to the development of other-oriented empathy, moral identity, and a sense of community. However, even if institutions offer activities such as performing arts that inspire those qualities, the crucial point is the teacher herself. Teachers need to develop an awareness of their own privilege first to create strong attachments to their students. Only then will students be able to feel that they truly belong. Only then will students be able to develop

empathy and a moral compass that motivates them to engage in a prosocial lifestyle. Thus, teaching teachers is a hinge point in. Teachers know too little about the complex social net they are manoeuvring and, quite often, are reliving and strengthening patriarchal and caste-biased stereotypes and beliefs. I argue for rigorous continuous in-service training that enables teachers to shed discriminatory concepts and embrace an empathic perspective that focuses on the needs of the most deprived parts of the Indian society, its neglected and maltreated lower-caste street girls. By foregrounding sustained teacher training, attachment-informed pedagogy, and school-based practices that foster belonging, the study contributes empirical and pedagogical insight into how education can support social action among highly marginalized children.

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Digitalization and Women's (Dis)empowerment in Education: The Paradox of Digital Learning Resilience and Agency in India

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Abstract: Digital technology has shaken up education in big ways, but when it comes to gender equity, the story is more complex. In India, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital learning opened new doors for women, but it also reinforced old barriers. This paper culls out research and national statistics to illuminate that while more women were online, many just found themselves stuck in the same patriarchal routines, now rebranded as “digital.” Take digital resilience and digital agency, for example. General perception about women is that they are resilient online, but most of the time, it just means that they’re putting up with inequality, not breaking free from it. The paper brings in stories from teachers, students, and even government policies. It’s clear: the home, once a place to escape, often turned into a tough spot for learning, especially for women. So, what actually helps? Not just giving everyone a device or an internet connection. Real digital empowerment means changing the system, making sure women have real access, safety, and a voice of their own. It’s not enough to aim for “access for all,” rather one needs to argue for “agency for each.”

Keywords: Digital, Paradox, Education, Technology, Empowerment, Women

Engendered Incongruity

Digitalization is reshaping education in the twenty-first century in ways we could hardly have imagined a few years ago. With technologies like learning management systems, multimedia content, and virtual classrooms, our approach to learning has been completely transformed, both in terms of access and delivery. In India, this change has been especially impactful, as the country is experiencing an incredible digital transformation, positioning itself to become a multi-trillion-dollar digital economy. Initiatives like Digital India are boosting connectivity, improving the delivery of services, and promoting platform-based governance. However, amidst this rapid growth, a troubling digital gender divide remains. National data show that only about one in three women has ever used the internet, compared to over half of men, and this discrepancy becomes even more pronounced in rural areas. This divide isn't just about access; it represents a huge loss in economic and educational opportunities. With more than 600 million women in India, there is so much potential waiting to be tapped if they have equal access to technology and the skills to use it. Bridging this divide could open doors for countless women to contribute to the digital economy and enrich their communities.

However, we must recognize that technology doesn't exist in a vacuum. Its benefits are influenced by the social structures and power dynamics of the surrounding context. Factors such as who has control over devices, who gets adequate support in digital settings, and the disparities in internet access are all shaped by societal norms. For example, traditional expectations around women's behavior and mobility can limit their ability to use technology freely, especially in rural areas where internet connectivity is already a challenge. Data reveals striking inequalities: many women, particularly in rural areas, have very limited or no access to the internet. Additionally, numerous schools lack essential resources, like functional computers and reliable electricity, which disproportionately affects girls, who are more likely to attend government schools in these low-income regions.

These intersecting barriers significantly impact how women and girls engage with digital learning. While digital platforms provide opportunities for multilingual content and flexible access, the reality often falls short due to ongoing gender-based inequalities. Issues like shared devices, surveillance at home, and concerns for online safety can restrict girls' autonomy and their ability to make full use of these digital resources.

It's a common misconception that merely providing access to technology is enough to empower. This oversimplification ignores deeper issues of agency, digital literacy, privacy, control, and the unequal distribution of household resources.

This paper seeks to answer a critical question: Does digitalization genuinely empower women and girls in India, or does it simply reinforce existing inequalities that are often disguised as progress? By differentiating between digital resilience and digital agency, it becomes clear that resilience more often means adapting to inequitable circumstances rather than challenging them.

Through an analysis of empirical data, national surveys, teacher experiences, and policy trends, we can better understand how gender influences digital participation. By investigating the relationship between digital learning environments and the social contexts in which girls learn and live, we can highlight the opportunities digitalization presents alongside the obstacles it creates. Ultimately, the goal is to shift from a focus on access for all to fostering agency for each individual. As digitalization continues to expand, its uneven impact is most evident in everyday learning environments, where the promise of equal access clashes with the realities imposed by gendered constraints. These complex dynamic forms form the core of our exploration of the paradox of digital learning.

The Paradox of Learning

The shift to digital learning during the pandemic was initially seen as a breakthrough for making education more accessible to everyone. Suddenly, classrooms moved into our homes, and technology seemed ready to bridge the gaps in education. However, when

learning happens at home, it intersects with the everyday social dynamics that shape our lives, often in unexpected ways. For many girls and women, the promise of digital education clashed with harsh realities: they faced unequal access to devices, limited control over technology, and increased household responsibilities.

The situation gets even more complicated when we look at the barriers that affect women's access to technology. Many women face challenges like a lack of proper infrastructure, low smartphone usage, and unequal ownership of devices. On top of that, social norms often restrict how women engage online. For instance, many families monitor or limit their daughters' use of digital tools because they worry about safety, exposure to inappropriate content, and societal judgment. These issues, both structural and cultural, make it harder for women not just to access technology but also to feel confident and comfortable using it.

Digital learning isn't taking place in a vacuum; it's influenced by domestic expectations like cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, tasks that girls frequently juggle alongside their studies. Teachers have observed that while girls may log in to their sessions, they often remain silent, multitasking, or dropping out of live classes due to interruptions at home. These patterns point to a bigger issue: participation in digital learning often feels conditional rather than independent.

The situation worsens with the architecture of digital teaching. Many online platforms and assessments assume reliable internet, uninterrupted access to devices, and dedicated study areas. These assumptions ignore the realities faced by students who may need to borrow devices, work with limited data, or study in crowded and noisy environments. When digital learning design fails to take into account the lived experiences of female learners, it inadvertently reinforces their disadvantages instead of alleviating them.

Thus, while digitalization can open up educational opportunities for women, it can also create new forms of dependency, surveillance, and exclusion. Digital learning often gives the impression of inclusivity while simultaneously deepening the inequalities already present in homes and institutions. This complex tension is at the core of the challenges faced by women in their digital educational experiences in India. To truly address these issues, we need a deeper understanding that differentiates between merely coping with inequality and actively working to transform it. This understanding lays the groundwork for the theoretical framework that will be discussed next.

Theoretical Lens: From Digital Resilience to Digital Agency

Understanding how digitalization impacts women and girls in India requires us to explore two different concepts: adapting to existing inequalities and pushing for real change. During the pandemic, much of the conversation around technology in education has celebrated resilience—how quickly students and teachers adapted to online learning. Yet, the stories of many women reveal that this resilience often means surviving rather than truly thriving.

Digital resilience describes the ability to navigate disruptions and continue learning under tough circumstances. For many women, this has meant sharing devices with family members, staying up late to study, managing limited data, or balancing online classes with domestic responsibilities. While these strategies showcase creativity and determination, they also highlight how women often have to fit themselves into a system that isn't built to meet their needs. When the expectation shifts solely to resilience, the deeper issues of inequality tend to remain unchallenged, quietly becoming the norm.

On the other hand, a digital agency is about having the power to make your own choices regarding how you use technology. It involves having reliable access to devices, being digitally literate, feeling secure in digital environments, and having the confidence to express oneself freely. It's about shaping your own learning journey, selecting the digital tools that work for you, and engaging with peers and teachers on equal footing. Agency is about moving beyond simply coping with the system to actually transforming it.

To better understand how resilience and agency interact, we can think about four key layers through which digitalization can both uplift and hinder women.

The first layer is infrastructure and access. Having adequate devices, stable internet connectivity, safe study spaces, and reliable electricity is crucial for meaningful participation. Without these essentials, resilience can become a stand-in for the support women really need, forcing them to find ways to manage rather than truly thrive.

The second layer focuses on skills and pedagogy. Digital literacy is more than just knowing how to use devices; it's about navigating online platforms, completing assignments, conducting research, and creating digital content. If digital skills are unevenly spread, women may find themselves in formal education settings but limited in what they can actually achieve.

The third layer involves norms and safety. Household expectations, gender roles, and concerns about harassment shape how women engage with digital learning. Fear of cyberbullying, judgment, or damage to their reputation can stifle their voice, limit participation, and affect their confidence.

The fourth layer is about governance and market structures. The way platforms are designed, how data is managed, privacy issues, and the role of commercial interests all influence how secure and equitable digital spaces can be. When these systems overlook gender-specific vulnerabilities, they perpetuate the same inequalities present in society as a whole.

These layers make it clear that simply having access to technology doesn't guarantee empowerment. Women can show incredible resilience in adapting to challenges, but when resilience is the only option, it can lead to compliance rather than self-

determination. Agency, on the other hand, requires the freedom to choose, influence one's educational path, and feel empowered in the digital world.

This discussion emphasizes the importance of shifting our narrative from simply applauding women's ability to endure obstacles to actively fostering environments, that is, technological, institutional, and social, where they no longer have to endure them. Only by doing this can we ensure that digitalization serves as a true tool for empowerment, rather than simply reinforcing existing inequalities. These ideas of resilience and agency are interconnected and stem from larger social structures that affect how technology is integrated into education. The next section will delve deeper into the conceptual foundations that define the relationship between digitalization and gender.

Conceptual Underpinnings of Digitalization and Gender

Digitalization is often hailed as a powerful force that can open doors and reduce social inequalities. However, it's crucial to recognize that technology operates within existing power structures, deeply influenced by the social, economic, and cultural contexts of its environment. In India, for instance, issues of gender intertwine with class, caste, rural living, disability, and age, creating complex patterns of both inclusion and exclusion. This means that while some women may find new opportunities through digitalization, others may face increased vulnerabilities.

Digitalization encompasses a wide array of tools and systems; think mobile phones, internet access, AI applications, online educational platforms, and digital finance solutions. The impact of these technologies' mirrors broader social dynamics. The questions of who owns the device, who decides how it's used, and who feels comfortable navigating the digital landscape all depend on existing hierarchical norms that have been in place long before these technologies arrived.

When the shift to digital learning took place, it became clear that the digital divide goes beyond just having access to devices. It also involves who gets to control those devices, who can engage without feeling watched, and who has the confidence to express themselves in online spaces. Even when women have formal access to technology, their use is often restricted by household expectations and surveillance, highlighting a deeper divide beyond mere ownership.

Moreover, digitalization tends to amplify existing educational inequalities. Students from rural or low-income families often have less exposure to digital tools, struggle with connectivity, and lack guidance on how to effectively use technology for learning. Girls in these households face additional layers of challenges, like domestic responsibilities, limited freedom to move around, and concerns about safety and reputation. These factors don't just affect access; they also shape the quality of digital interactions.

The idea of intersectionality adds another layer of complexity. For example, rural girls may deal with inconsistent electricity and poor connectivity, while those from

marginalized castes may encounter a lack of support or even discrimination. Students with disabilities frequently find that digital platforms aren't designed with accessibility in mind. Language can also be a barrier, particularly when digital content is primarily available in dominant languages. All these overlapping factors play a crucial role in shaping how different groups of women experience the digital world and whether they can turn that access into real agency.

In India, many women between the ages of 15 and 49 face a significant barrier: a lack of education. A large number of them haven't completed even ten years of schooling, which deeply affects their ability to safely and effectively use smartphones. This gap in basic literacy not only leads to digital illiteracy but also makes women more susceptible to a range of online threats like misinformation, fraud, harassment, and cyberbullying. It's a harsh reality that when you combine low education, limited access to technology, and heightened vulnerability, it creates an uphill battle for these women. This situation highlights the complex challenges they face in an increasingly digital world.

Ultimately, these insights demonstrate that digitalization is a landscape where existing inequalities are reconfigured, rather than erased. Technology can be a force for empowerment, but only if we address the underlying issues that perpetuate inequality. Without this focus, there's a risk that digitalization could reinforce the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. This understanding paves the way for examining how India's push toward digitalization in education interacts with the gender dynamics present in schools, households, and communities. The next step is to delve into how national policy reforms and digital platforms have shaped educational systems in India.

Digital Landscape in India

In India's policy landscape regarding digital education, it's clear there's a strong focus on equity and inclusion. Initiatives like DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and PM e-VIDYA illustrate this commitment. DIKSHA, for instance, is a national platform packed with multilingual resources, teacher training modules, and QR-coded textbooks, making it easier for students to access enriched learning materials from anywhere. PM e-VIDYA goes a step further by combining digital content, online resources, and even television programming to ensure that learners without reliable internet still have access to educational support. These initiatives represent a national effort to build digital public infrastructure that is both accessible and equipped to meet diverse learning needs.

However, the potential of these platforms often depends on the local conditions of schools and communities. Many educational institutions continue to struggle with inconsistent internet, outdated computers, unreliable electricity, or a lack of trained staff, which can make digital learning a challenge. These issues are especially prevalent in rural and government schools, where students and teachers often rely on basic resources. Without the right conditions in place, even the most advanced technologies risk being underused or completely inaccessible. The true promise of digital education hinges on its thoughtful implementation and an understanding of the real-world contexts in which girls and

women are learning. While national programs have indeed expanded digital infrastructure, they interact with household dynamics and systemic inequalities in complex ways that especially affect access and control for girls.

Gendered Access and Control in Digital Learning

Access to digital learning is influenced not just by having devices and internet connectivity, but also by the social dynamics within households that dictate who can use them, when, and for what reasons. For many girls and women, these dynamics are intertwined with family power structures, expectations around domestic responsibilities, and long-standing cultural norms regarding technology use. As a result, the experience of digital learning can often favor some learners while sidelining others.

Household Level Dynamics

In many families, digital devices are shared, and the person who controls access often determines who can join online learning. Girls frequently depend on shared phones and must negotiate limited time slots, which disrupts their independence and learning routines. Household expectations also affect girls' participation. Domestic chores often take priority, causing them to multitask or miss classes. Some families also restrict girls' screen time due to safety concerns, limiting their ability to engage in online activities fully. These conditions reduce their participation and reinforce the idea that girls' learning is less important.

Classroom Level Outcomes

Challenges at home often affect girls' classroom performance. Teachers report lower attendance, less participation, and hesitation to ask questions. Even when girls join sessions, they may stay muted, off-camera, or be distracted by chores, which can undermine confidence and academic progress. Digital platforms assume stable internet and dedicated devices, but girls often face interruptions from weak networks or shared phones. These disruptions cause them to miss key activities and assessments, leading to learning gaps, even when they appear to be present online.

Digital Access Patterns and Skill Gaps

Recent surveys indicate a significant shift in the digital divide. It's no longer just about access to technology; now it's about skills. While more people are using mobile phones than ever before, many still struggle with basic digital tasks. This is especially evident among women, who often find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to essential skills like sending texts and emails, using digital platforms and applications for creative writing, translations, statistical and mathematical manipulation, playing stimulation games (quizzes, puzzles, sudoku), managing online banking, or creating presentations. This issue is particularly severe for young women aged 15 to 29. This age group is crucial for educational and professional opportunities, as well as for entrepreneurship. If these skill gaps aren't addressed, many women might find themselves stuck in low-tech, low-

paying jobs, even as India's digital economy continues to grow. We must empower these women with the digital skills they need to thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Ultimately, these issues highlight that the digital divide extends beyond mere access to devices and the internet. It encompasses who has control over access, who feels capable of using technology, and who is allowed to develop digital skills without interruption or scrutiny. If we don't tackle these deep-rooted inequalities, we risk allowing digital learning to exacerbate rather than alleviate gender-based disparities. Furthermore, the rise of digitalization brings its own set of risks and vulnerabilities that shape how girls and women engage in online learning environments, challenges that will be explored further in the next section.

New Forms of Disempowerment in Digital Education

Digitalization has opened up exciting new opportunities for learning, yet it has also brought about challenges that can leave many feeling disempowered, especially women and girls. While technology promotes inclusion, it can inadvertently perpetuate social disadvantages. For many girls and women, the world of digital education carries risks that threaten their autonomy, privacy, and safety, creating hurdles within systems that are supposed to support their growth.

Online Harassment and Cyber Insecurity

Girls often face online harassment, impersonation, and invasive scrutiny, leading families to restrict their use of cameras, microphones, or chat features for safety. These fears can undermine girls' confidence and push them to limit participation—or withdraw entirely—from digital spaces. When people struggle with digital literacy, they become much more vulnerable to online dangers. Women and girls who lack essential skills often find themselves facing issues like online harassment, misleading information, and breaches of privacy. This fear of cyberbullying or being exposed can make families hesitant about letting their daughters engage fully in online activities. Unfortunately, this creates a cycle where limited access leads to even less confidence and capability in navigating the digital world.

Economic Exclusion and Unequal Learning Conditions

Economic factors also impact the consistency of digital education. A broken device, an expired data plan, or even just a temporary technical glitch can lead to prolonged interruptions in a girl's learning, often leaving her behind or disengaged. When resources are scarce, the disruption seems to stretch on endlessly, escalating the risk of educational setbacks. Within the limited resources, girls remain at the margin of supply in the family.

Data Practices, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Bias

Digital platforms collect extensive personal data, and weak transparency can expose users—especially girls—to risks like tracking and profiling. In many homes, girls face heightened monitoring through checked browsing histories or restricted online activities,

which limits their autonomy. Such scrutiny can make learning feel controlled rather than empowering. Additionally, algorithmic systems in education and employment may reinforce existing biases, further disadvantaging girls and narrowing their opportunities.

Pedagogical Designs: Gendered Asymmetry

Assignments that require specific software, extended screen time, or high bandwidth can unfairly position girls at a disadvantage. When the resources they need are out of their control, their performance may seem weaker—even if their abilities match those of their peers. Consequently, digital learning can become a pathway of exclusion rather than inclusion when designs don't account for the uneven resources across different learners. This dynamic not only affects their educational journey but also shapes their confidence and competence in developing digital skills, highlighting the persistent gender gaps in digital literacy that still exist.

Gendered Digital Literacy

Digital literacy involves more than using a device—it requires navigating platforms, interpreting information, completing digital tasks, and communicating effectively online. For girls from school to university, developing these skills is often hindered by limited access to technology, restrictive household norms, and lower confidence shaped by early social expectations. This leads many girls to approach digital tools cautiously, worry about making mistakes, and miss out on the informal, trial-and-error learning that boys often gain through regular device use. As a result, gaps in digital competence become visible in everyday tasks like searching for information, uploading assignments, or troubleshooting basic issues, especially when their device access is limited to completing immediate schoolwork.

These challenges are compounded by platforms designed with unfamiliar languages or technical jargon, inconsistent digital-skills instruction across schools and colleges, and uneven teacher preparedness—including among female educators who face similar barriers. By the time girls reach higher education, these early disadvantages can limit their confidence in virtual collaboration, online coursework, and pathways into STEM fields or digital opportunities like internships and scholarships. Without sustained support from home and school, digital literacy becomes a privilege rather than a foundation, leaving many girls less equipped to thrive throughout their educational journey.

Digital Resilience or Silent Endurance?

During and after the pandemic, girls and women were often praised for their “resilience” as they navigated limited devices, unstable internet, and heavy household responsibilities. But much of what appeared as strength was actually silent endurance—late-night studying after chores, borrowing phones, and constantly catching up—efforts that came with hidden costs like stress, exhaustion, and reduced learning quality. These coping strategies didn't challenge inequality; they simply helped girls survive it while systemic barriers remained untouched.

Digital environments can unintentionally normalize this endurance, rewarding attendance over true engagement and overlooking the conditions that force girls to adapt. What is framed as resilience often shifts responsibility onto learners instead of addressing unequal access and support from school to university. True empowerment requires moving beyond celebrating perseverance and toward creating systems that reduce the need for endurance, giving girls real agency in their digital education.

Empowering women through digital literacy goes beyond just providing training. Girls must have access to technology from an early age, not just as passive users, but as active co-creators who can help shape the digital landscape. By equipping them with essential digital skills, we can boost their employability, enhance their participation in online learning, and open up new pathways into technology-driven careers. This approach not only fosters confidence but also inspires innovation among young women, allowing them to take an active role in the digital world. Transitioning from theory to practice, we can look at real-world examples of digital initiatives in India and beyond. The following section will share tangible case studies that illustrate how these ideas play out in real-life contexts.

Digital Indian Exemplars

DIKSHA and PM e VIDYA

Take the national platforms like DIKSHA and PM e-VIDYA, for instance. These systems are among the largest public digital education resources in the world. DIKSHA offers a treasure trove of digital textbooks, QR-coded materials, and teacher training modules in various languages, while PM e-VIDYA connects students through online lessons and dedicated TV broadcasts. These platforms aim to provide learning opportunities for students who might not have access to private tutors or those residing in remote areas. Yet, the reality is that disparities in access to devices and reliable internet connections often hinder girls from fully benefiting. Many girls have to share phones within their families, which limits their study time and the resources available to them.

Rajasthan Smartphone Scheme

On a state level, the Rajasthan Smartphone Scheme stands out as a significant step towards bridging the digital gap. By distributing smartphones and data specifically to women and girls, the initiative empowers them to have their own devices, moving away from relying on family-owned phones. Early feedback suggests that having personal phones increases participation in online classes and access to government services. However, issues like safety concerns, harassment, and household monitoring still cast a shadow over how freely girls can use these devices.

Higher Education MOOCs and the Digital Skills Divide

In higher education, massive open online courses (MOOCs) have opened doors for self-paced learning on a grand scale. Many women are enrolling in these courses, and some universities even recognize them for academic credit. However, it's disheartening to note that completion rates for women, particularly in technical and science subjects, tend to lag. This disparity often stems from limited access to devices, bandwidth issues, and lower confidence in navigating digital tools. The challenges become particularly pronounced in assignments that require advanced software or coding capabilities.

Female Participation in STEM and Elite Institutions

While reforms in higher education are bringing more women into technical fields, there's still a noticeable gap in digital preparedness. For those entering programs at elite engineering institutions, familiarity with online learning platforms, coding tools, and collaborative technologies is crucial for success. Unfortunately, girls who don't have a strong digital foundation face significant hurdles in keeping up with coursework and accessing research opportunities.

Comparative Experience from Regional Laptop and Device Programs

Insights from regional laptop and device programs further illustrate that merely providing access isn't enough. Countries implementing large-scale laptop distributions have seen marked improvements in participation among female students, but these programs also underline that true success hinges on addressing underlying issues like safety concerns, confidence building, and support for developing advanced digital skills. Long-term effectiveness requires consistent data access, maintenance, and digital literacy training.

Community Level Learning Conditions

On a community level, especially in rural areas, girls often turn to neighbors or local gathering spots for digital access. Some villages have formed informal learning groups where children share devices or come together to watch lessons on television. While these arrangements can help, they also reveal the heavy load on girls to adapt to often unstable learning conditions. Without proper institutional support, these community-based solutions rely heavily on individual resilience rather than structural support.

Bridging the Digital Divide with a focus on Skills

Recent surveys reveal an encouraging trend—nine out of ten men and four out of five women use mobile phones. This highlights the growing connectivity, but there's a concerning gap in device ownership: while 84 percent of men own devices, only 56 percent of women do. Even more alarming is the significant disparity in digital skills. Women are falling behind men when it comes to essential online tasks like using email, managing online banking, and navigating digital documents. These gaps in skills aren't just statistics; they represent real barriers that could hold back women-led businesses and

limit their potential to contribute to the economy. Without specific initiatives aimed at empowering women with these essential skills, we risk limiting their opportunities and stifling India's growth potential. Addressing this divide is not just about access—it's about ensuring that everyone has the skills needed to thrive in a digital world. (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. (2023).

Annual modular survey: Telecom (2023). Government of India)

To summarize, while digitalization has significantly expanded the availability of educational opportunities, the benefits are deeply influenced by social norms, household dynamics, and individual capabilities. For girls and women, meaningful engagement with digital resources goes beyond just access; it relies on nurturing environments, safe usage conditions, and chances to cultivate digital independence. The stories emerging from India echo similar challenges faced worldwide, demonstrating that gendered digital inequalities are both a local and a global issue.

Comparative and Global Perspective

The impact of digitalization on education isn't just a challenge in India; it's a global issue that many countries are facing. As technology continues to grow, it's important to consider how it interacts with existing social norms, economic disparities, and the varying capacities of institutions. By examining different regions, we can appreciate not only the unique circumstances in India but also the broader patterns affecting women's participation in digital learning worldwide.

The gap between men and women in ICT (Information and Communication Technology) skills continues to be a pressing issue, especially in South Asia. Despite the growing availability of the internet, many women in low-income and rural areas still find themselves depending on shared devices. This limits their chances to develop and enhance their digital skills. Take India, for example. It's striking to note that about two-thirds of women over the age of 15 struggle with basic tasks like using email, and they are more than twenty percentage points behind their male counterparts when it comes to engaging in digital economic transactions. This situation highlights the ongoing challenges women face in accessing technology and the skills necessary to thrive in today's digital world.

In many low and middle-income areas, women encounter significant obstacles when trying to access mobile and internet services. South Asia, in particular, stands out for its stark gender disparities. Women are much less likely than men to own mobile devices or use the internet, which directly impacts their ability to take advantage of online learning opportunities. Factors like device ownership, cost, and confidence in using technology, combined with societal expectations around safety and domestic roles, create complex challenges that hinder women's participation in digital education.

Despite the challenges, India's approach to digital education is noteworthy due to its scale. National programs have succeeded in reaching millions of learners through online and television channels, and public digital infrastructure is expanding across different states. However, the success of these initiatives heavily relies on access at the household level, a safe environment, and a foundation of digital literacy. In households where women have limited control over technology or where their internet usage is closely monitored, their ability to participate remains inconsistent and restricted.

When we look at neighboring countries, we can see both shared experiences and differences. Some nations have implemented programs that distribute laptops or tablets to university students, including women. These initiatives show that providing guaranteed access to devices can encourage more women to engage in online courses. However, they also highlight that access alone isn't enough; supportive environments, training, and ongoing resources are crucial for success.

Further afield, countries like Indonesia show that investments in affordable internet, mixed learning methods, and community-centered digital initiatives can help increase women's participation in higher education, particularly in urban and peri-urban settings. Even so, these nations also grapple with ensuring that women not only start but also complete studies in technology-related fields.

A consistent theme emerges globally: simply achieving equal enrollment numbers doesn't equate to digital empowerment. Even in cases where women reach or exceed male enrollment in higher education, gaps persist in terms of digital skills, confidence, and engagement in science and technology disciplines. These gaps can affect learning outcomes, job opportunities, and long-term career paths.

For India, the broader context reveals that the main issue isn't just the extent of digitalization but the equity of its benefits. Deep-rooted inequalities within households, educational institutions, and job markets shape how women experience digital learning, mirroring trends seen in various parts of the world. This global perspective highlights the urgent need for inclusive, gender-sensitive digital education policies that address the various intersecting barriers women face. Recognizing these global patterns can help us grasp the necessary policy measures to ensure that digitalization fosters, rather than hinders, gender equity. The next section will dive into key policy implications and future directions.

Shifting Gears: From (Dis)empowerment to Empowerment

The growth of digital education in India is a vital opportunity to tackle long-standing issues of gender inequality. However, if we're not careful and intentional about our approach, this digital shift could end up deepening existing gaps instead of closing them. It's important for policies to broaden their focus beyond just access to technology and to include aspects like empowering women and girls, promoting their autonomy, and

providing structural support. We need to teach responsible technology practices, like protecting our data and ensuring privacy, to help minimize online risks. Plus, it's vital for tech companies and government agencies to work together to create platforms that are not only inclusive but also free from any biases. This way, we can make sure everyone has a fair and safe experience online. To truly make a difference, we need to coordinate our efforts across various areas like infrastructure, teaching methods, societal attitudes, and governance.

Strengthen foundational infrastructure: Equitable digital education requires reliable devices, stable internet, electricity, and safe study spaces, supported by well-maintained school labs and community hubs like libraries or learning centers where girls can learn safely. Government initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan, the National Digital Library, and the Stay Safe Online campaign have begun improving access and safety in rural areas, and expanding these efforts with stronger attention to gender can help close persistent gaps in connectivity, resources, and digital awareness.

Ensure affordable and inclusive access: It's essential that girls, especially from low-income families, have their own devices rather than sharing. Public programs providing subsidized devices and data plans for female learners can enhance their independence. We also need to maintain multi-modal delivery methods, like using television and radio for lessons, to reach those who don't have constant internet access.

Promote digital literacy with gender responsive pedagogy: Digital literacy should be woven into all areas of the curriculum. Schools should include practical skills like online research, filling out forms, basic coding, and project-based digital work. Teachers require structured support and training to adopt gender-sensitive teaching practices that nurture participation and lessen anxiety for female students. Flexible learning options, low-bandwidth solutions, and device-independent tasks can foster inclusivity in digital learning.

Enhance online safety and well-being: It's crucial to create safer online spaces that allow girls to participate confidently. Standard protocols should include settings that prioritize privacy, restrictions on sharing personal information, moderated communication features, and clear reporting channels for harassment. Institutions should maintain open lines of communication with families to build trust and clarify how safety is prioritized.

Increase representation and leadership: Women need to be more involved in the design and governance of digital education initiatives. Their presence ensures that platforms, content, and policies truly reflect the diverse needs and experiences within the community. By encouraging women as mentors, instructors, content creators, and decision-makers, we can create a more supportive environment and provide positive role models for girls.

Promote fairness and accountability in digital systems: As technology plays a larger role in assessments and communication, we must ensure fairness and transparency in governance structures. Platforms should have user-friendly interfaces and responsible data practices, prioritizing learner privacy. It's also essential to monitor gender-disaggregated data on usage, participation, course completion, and learning outcomes to identify gaps and target interventions.

Design for equity from the outset: Digital platforms and learning materials should prioritize simplicity, accessibility in language, and be functional with low bandwidth. Course formats must be adaptable for learners who may experience disruptions or rely on shared devices. Providing offline content, downloadable packages, and flexible deadlines can help bridge the digital readiness divide.

Support teachers as central actors in digital reform: Teachers need ongoing training, mentorship, and dedicated time to build their digital skills and incorporate gender-sensitive approaches into their teaching. Especially in rural areas, female teachers can greatly benefit from short online courses, communities of practice, and resources that bolster their confidence and professional development.

Build collaborative and supportive learning communities: Establishing peer learning groups, study circles for girls, and community-based digital centers can foster safe and encouraging spaces for exploration and practice. Structured support for collaborative projects can help girls build communication skills, leadership, and digital confidence.

Align school and higher education pathways: The digital skills developed in school should connect to opportunities in higher education and the workforce. Strengthening these skills in secondary education prepares girls for technology-focused programs, online courses, and research-based learning. Universities must ensure that female students have the necessary access to research tools, mentorship, and chances to engage in digital projects.

All these insights highlight the importance of prioritizing agency and equity in shaping the future of digital learning. Building a future where everyone has an equal chance to thrive requires thoughtful and comprehensive action on multiple fronts.

Insightful Takeaways

Digital technology has transformed education in India, expanding access through online platforms and digital libraries. Yet this progress also exposes persistent gender gaps. For many girls and women, digital learning offers opportunity but also repeats old inequalities—limited device access, household control, and restrictions on autonomy shape who truly benefits. Girls often stretch themselves to keep up, juggling chores, borrowing devices, and working through poor connectivity. Their resilience is admirable, but it also hides the unfair burden placed on them, turning online learning into endurance rather than empowerment.

Real change requires more than providing devices; it demands ensuring girls have agency—control over how and when they use technology, freedom to explore, and safety online. That means tackling core barriers: unequal device ownership, low digital confidence, heavy domestic workloads, and concerns about online risks. India’s investments in digital platforms have laid a strong foundation, but the next step is building systems that prioritize gender equity through better infrastructure, safer digital environments, inclusive digital-skills training, and accessible resources. When girls can participate freely and confidently, digital learning becomes a force for shifting power, amplifying new voices, and expanding opportunity—a future India must strive to achieve.

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Gendered Digital Citizenship in the Age of AI: A Comparative Analysis of Women's Online Safety, Data Rights, and Algorithmic Governance in India and Sweden

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Abstract:

The swift deployment of artificial intelligence (AI), digital governance mechanisms, and data-driven platforms is radically changing the digital citizenship landscape in the world. But while these have transformative effects, they also cause socially disparate effects, particularly for women and girls facing surveillance, privacy concerns, and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), among other challenges. Research on the social implications of these changes has shown that such digital technologies amplify online violence and perpetuate patterns and dynamics of inequality and marginalization. This study juxtaposes India with Sweden for a comparison of gender-specific digital citizenship: both societies have unique but very interesting digital milieus, India as a Global South-emerging democracy that has implemented several interventions to promote online inclusiveness, and Sweden as a high-technology welfare state, with strong regulatory systems and high levels of gender equality. Using feminist technoscience, intersectionality theory, and critical data studies concepts, this study examines the impact of an assortment of digital infrastructures, such as biometric identification systems, artificial intelligence-supported content moderation, predictive policing, and platform governance structures, on women's autonomy, safety perceptions, and trust in online institutions. Using a mixed methods approach that incorporates policy analysis, digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews with different women users, this study explores how algorithmic biases, socio-cultural dynamics, and responses of institutions differently influence women's experiences within these two environments. Early findings suggest that while Sweden has strong protections for digital rights, together with policies sensitive to gender issues in place, women continue to experience extreme online harassment, along with new risks regarding the privacy of AI applications. Likewise, digital inclusion initiatives have improved access, but enduring challenges in literacy, digital infrastructure, and institutions' poor reactions to them also place women at increased risk of online threats in India. By highlighting similarities and differences between these contexts, the analysis provides important insights into global discussions on ethical AI governance, digital rights advocacy, and gender justice, and provides actionable recommendations that can be deployed as part of the policies to promote women's safety engagement in the digitised world, both Global North and South.

Keywords: Algorithmic governance; Artificial intelligence (AI); Digital citizenship; Digital gender divide; Gender and technology; Online safety; Privacy and data rights;

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV); Women's digital empowerment; Women's rights in digital societies.

Background and Significance

The rapid progress in artificial intelligence (AI), data-driven governance, and digital platforms has altered how people participate in today's social, economic, and political arenas. People across the globe are increasingly engaging with institutions and markets, and communities through digital infrastructures that are crucial for identity, mobility, communication, and access. This reliance on digital systems has intensified a need for digital citizenship—a concept encompassing not just access to technology but also the rights, responsibilities, and safeguards of participation in digitally mediated societies. In the age of AI, the idea of digital citizenship is more complex than ever. AI-powered systems from algorithmic content moderation and facial recognition to predictive policing and automated distribution of welfare alter ways of participating but also introduce new vulnerabilities. Those technologies can reinforce current social hierarchies, reproduce the inequities that characterize datasets, and produce opaque decision-making processes that shape personal autonomy and liberties. The discussions of digital citizenship are now more about issues of data rights, algorithmic fairness, privacy, surveillance, and accountability of institutions than connectivity (or even access). Such dynamics have a particular impact on women. Worldwide research shows that algorithmic bias, online harassment, and intrusive data practices harm women and gender diversity (especially where caste, race, class, ethnicity, or migration status intersect), while girls and young adults within diverse gender groups continue to bear the brunt of the data. Tech-enabled gender-based violence (TFGBV), biased AI outputs, and digital surveillance are increasingly defining the experiences of women online throughout their lives by shaping their experiences of security, belonging, and agency through digital spaces. With countries deploying huge digital identification systems in addition to automated public services and AI-driven governance paradigms, we must start to consider how these new technologies intersect with the current mechanisms of gender power. Studying technologically complex welfare states, including Sweden, in comparison to fast-digitizing digital-led developing economies like India, would offer rich points about global digital citizenship inequality. The Swedish regulatory procedures, as well as strong data protection standards and high levels of digital literacy, set a model for rights-based systems of governance. However, India's aggressive steps towards inclusion in the digital space also illustrate how socio-economic heterogeneity and infrastructural gaps affect the nature of digital citizenship in their domestic environment. We also see some similarities and disparities, while at the same time discovering promising challenges in these diverse contexts to contribute to the generation of fair futures in the digital environment. A comprehension of digital citizenship in the age of AI is crucial to understanding how people navigate digital ecosystems to assert rights and navigate power in algorithmically managed contexts. This is an important question that can inform policy and justice initiatives, both on the human side and in the realm of democratic governance and human rights, as we think globally about technology governance and social equity.

The Emergence of Algorithmic Governance and Global Worries Concerning Gendered Consequences

AI and machine-learning systems have increased the range of applications for information analysis, governance, and decision-making in an age of machine-governance where decision-making is increasingly being transformed in a manner that is biased towards ensuring inequalities in the allocation of resources, opportunities, and rights. Government and intermediaries, all over both the Global North and Global South, apply algorithms to identity verification, welfare delivery, policing, content moderation, and risk assessment. While these systems promise efficiency, scalability, and objectivity, research across disciplines shows that algorithmic governance tends to reproduce, and sometimes intensifies, pre-existing gendered inequalities.

An expanding body of scholarship shows that AI systems are by no means objective; they are indicative of biases built into the data they are trained on. Gender differences in digital footprints, historically biased training datasets, and structural inequities in data collection frequently led to discriminatory outcomes for women and gender minorities. This may occur through facial recognition detection technologies that mislabel individuals. It is also evident in biased algorithmic content moderation that frequently silences women's voices and in predictive policing systems that perpetuate patriarchal assumptions about movement and threat. Their concerns are particularly pronounced for women who hail from poor, marginalized social locations, such as those based on caste, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, and socio-economic status, which are not present anywhere near the majority in mainstream information collections.

International bodies such as the United Nations, UNESCO, and the OECD warn that algorithmic governance represents a significant risk to privacy, autonomy, and non-discrimination, particularly for women. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) has grown in tandem with algorithmic advances, which have been driven by opaque recommendation algorithms that escalate harassment, amplify misogynistic content, and facilitate targeting-based attacks. The opacity of algorithmic processes also minimizes women's ability to seek remedy, making it challenging to contest devastating choices or hold institutions and platforms accountable.

Algorithmic governance, moreover, is implemented in quite different ways nationally. AI is making more and more appearances in public services in highly digitized welfare states such as Sweden, raising issues of consent, transparency, and data ethics. In fast-digitizing environments like India, the use of mass biometrics and growing platform economies has both potential for inclusion but also high risks of tracking, misuse of data, and exclusionary algorithmic profiling.

These obstacles highlight the necessity for gender-sensitive methods of AI development, data governance, and regulations. Indeed, an analytical appreciation of the gendered nature of algorithmic governance is necessary to protect digital citizenship, democratize

participation, and protect human rights in a time when algorithms are playing a growing role in mediating our civic experience. By comparative analysis, this investigation aims to shed light on how algorithmic systems influence women's digital life experiences, vulnerabilities, and potential in different socio-political systems and to add to international discussions on ethical, inclusive, and accountable AI governance.

Why India and Sweden? Justification for Comparing a Global South and a Global North Context

India and Sweden represent a particularly interesting and analytically robust dichotomy for studying gendered digital citizenship in the era of artificial intelligence. Sitting at two extremes of global digital terrain, India in the Global South and Sweden in the Global North, one is characterized largely by historical continuity, governance mechanisms, welfare systems, and culture; the other by diversity and technology. The comparison also offers important contributions to the analysis of how structural, technology-based, and institutional contexts influence female digital experience under diverse frameworks: development, regulation, and social equity.

India is one of the world's fastest-digitizing democracies, known for its diverse population, uneven digital access, fast progress in e-governance, and ambitious national initiatives such as Digital India, Aadhaar-based authentication, and large-scale digital education. However, such advances have to be achieved in the context of deep-seated economic and social disparities and diverse literacy levels, and a low level of capacity for institutions to deal with online harms. This means that women's digital citizenship in India is mediated by intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, region, and gender norms, and can thus provide a critical case model of how AI systems work in complex social contexts.

In contrast, Sweden is an affluent welfare state that has strong technological development and access to the internet, very high equality between genders in policies and with the regulation and regulatory tools, e.g., GDPR, AI ethics codes, and transparency in digital governance mechanisms. Still, Swedish women face real obstacles too, including online misogyny, privacy infringement, and new worries about algorithmic bias, highlighting that technological progress has not reduced gendered dangers.

The comparison between India and Sweden makes it possible to examine the following cross-structural elements with respect to the two countries:

- How do policy designs, safety nets, and regulatory regimes shape women's confidence in digital systems?
- How do AI-generated decisions replicate or ameliorate gendered inequalities in different social and cultural sectors?
- How do technologies of power underpin gender-based violence in highly digitized and rapidly digitizing societies alike?

The comparison between the Global South and the Global North not only sheds light on patterns common in digital gender inequalities but also highlights how different institutional configurations can help create alternative routes to enabling gender-sensitive, rights-based digital citizenship. This comparative inquiry reinforces global scholarship across AI governance, digital justice, and the future of equitable digital societies that are grounded in equity.

Research Gap Analysis

While increasing international concern around digital rights and online gendered harms, academic works exploring gendered digital citizenship are fragmented and uneven. So far, studies have tended to privilege the West or focus on only technical biases in AI, or to study women's digital vulnerabilities instead of locating them within larger sociopolitical contexts of governance, surveillance, and inequality. Few compare Global North and Global South contexts, such as in India and Sweden, leading to substantial gaps in understanding how women's online safety, data autonomy, and experiences with algorithmic governance are constructed by the unique institutional regimes, cultural norms, and technological infrastructures of both sides. Also, intersectional phenomena in terms of caste, class, race, and socio-economic marginality are often underexplored, meaning that an incomplete picture about how AI-mediated digital realms reproduce or challenge gendered power relations prevails. This paper seeks to fill this gap with a comprehensive, cross-country, intersectional analysis of digital citizenship, safety, and rights in technologically evolving societies.

Research Design and Epistemic Approaches:

The current literature on gendered digital citizenship in the age of AI continues to face a number of structural limitations. There are still very fragmented disciplinary boundaries, with large amounts of work originating either from computational sciences, particularly algorithmic architecture, data modelling, and system performance, or from the social sciences, which stress women lived experiences and socio-cultural environments. This is siloed, and hence, the construction of comprehensive, cross-disciplinary methodologies that can effectively bring algorithmic processes together with the subtlety of gendered experience online is limited. In addition, the terrain of the research is also uneven and narrow, with a preference for single-country research or overemphasis on major economies (i.e., India, Brazil, and South Africa), where significant parts of the regions of the Global South are still analytically invisible. In addition, the restricted adoption of intersectional epistemologies in research design has led to an incomplete appreciation of how caste, race, class, religion, age, disability, and other axes of marginalisation co-produce women's digital experiences and vulnerabilities in AI-mediated settings. Taken together, the limitations highlight the necessity for more multilayered, rich, and

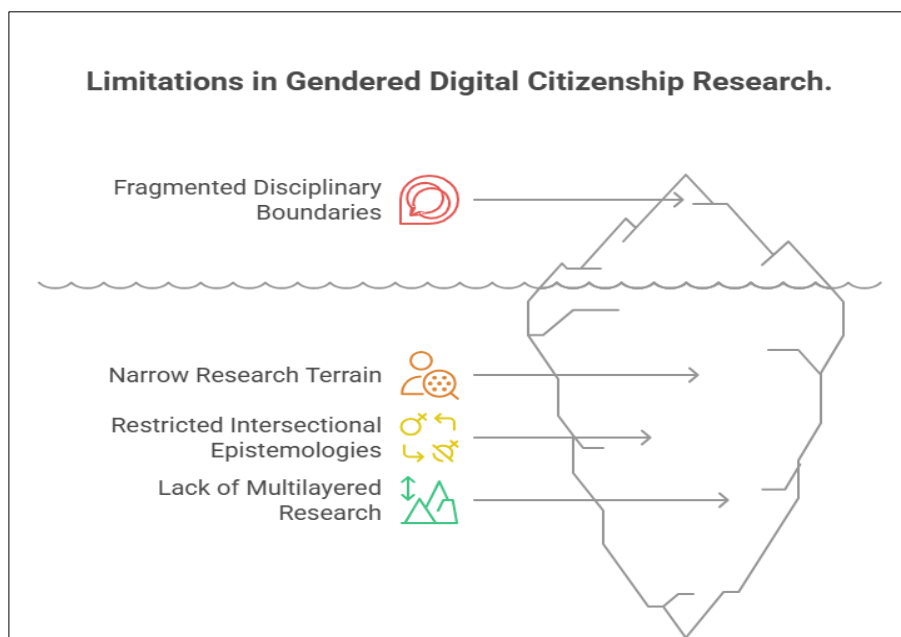
methodologically far-reaching research to accurately characterise the complexity of gendered digital citizenship in a wide variety of Global South contexts.

Gaps in Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations:

Existing academic debates suggest a marked lack of a cohesive conceptual frame that integrates findings from gender studies, digital citizenship theory, AI ethics, and postcolonial digital sociology. This fragmentation has constrained the articulation of women’s agency, vulnerability, and resistance within AI-mediated environments. Most of the current theoretical discussions are still entrenched in Euro-American epistemologies, but they miss the range of Global South feminist knowledge systems and socio-technical imaginaries that provide alternative perspectives on digital power. Additionally, important topics such as power asymmetries, algorithmic governance, and data colonialism are inadequately articulated in conjunction with gender. Consequently, less is done to understand how AI-driven infrastructures perpetuate or reconfigure structural inequalities that shape women’s digital experiences through processes that remain largely opaque, unregulated, and deeply embedded in global hierarchies of knowledge, technology, and control.

Policy Translation and Applied Interventions

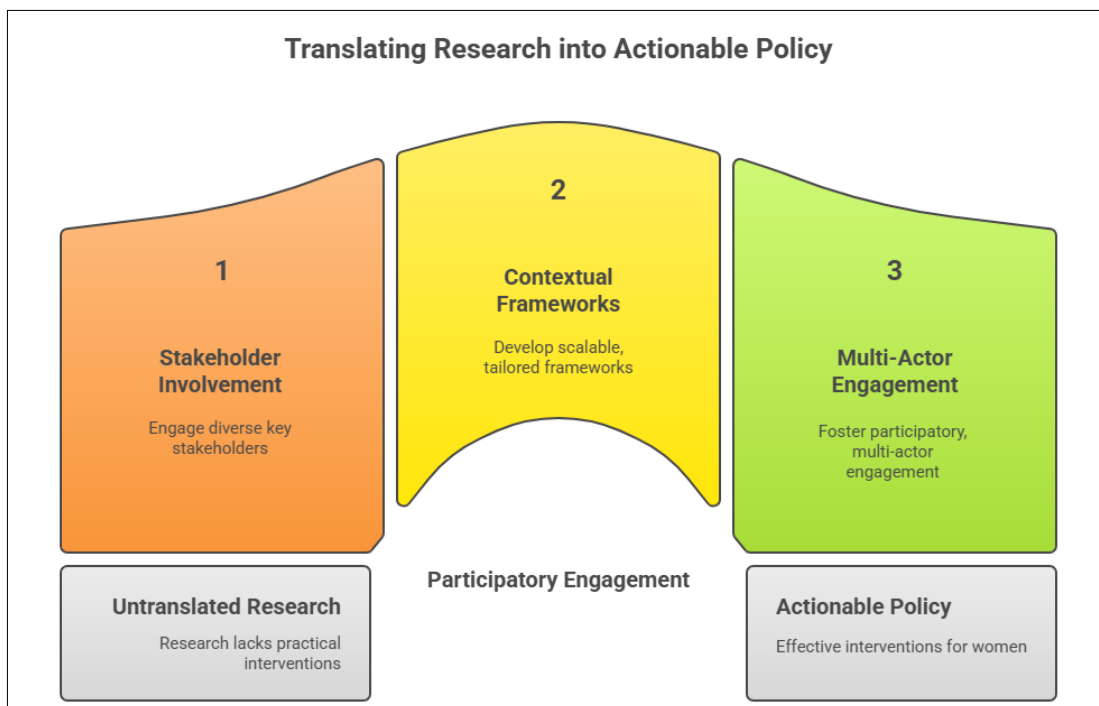
Research is not well translated into context-specific, actionable interventions that address the structural complexities, particularly with regard to AI regulation, digital safety, and women’s data rights. Existing scholarship rarely develops practical, scalable frameworks that can effectively support digital inclusion, cyber safety infrastructures, algorithmic accountability mechanisms, or rights-based awareness programs tailored to diverse socio-cultural environments. Moreover, the limited involvement of key stakeholders, including



government agencies, technology companies, feminist movements, civil society organizations, and international governance bodies, significantly constrains the applicability and impact of existing research. Without such participatory, multi-actor engagement, policy responses risk remaining technocratic, fragmented, and insufficiently attuned to the lived realities of women navigating AI-mediated digital ecosystems.

Unexplored and Emerging Arena for Original Research

The gender-AI nexus has been relatively less studied, particularly as it relates to the role of biases in machine learning models in shaping women’s online visibility, digital safety, and autonomy over personal data. Cross-country, comparative studies are extremely uncommon, and this leaves substantial opportunities for systematic investigation in different regions of the Global South to determine common vulnerabilities and variable governance responses. Longitudinal or time-sensitive research designs are also inadequate, which restricts our exploration of how gendered digital citizenship may be emerging amid rapid technological change. In addition, there are vast prospects for multi-



scalar case studies, which bring us to the local experiences, which in turn are tied to the wider dynamics of algorithmic governance, platform surveillance, and global digital rights regimes.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study, under a composite theoretical framework, integrates feminist technoscience, intersectionality, critical data studies, and digital citizenship theory to address the ways women move through algorithmically mediated spaces in India and Sweden. Feminist

technoscience allows us to use technology as a socio-political artefact that is influenced by gendered power dynamics, and intersectionality puts the way in which identities, such as caste, race, class, age, or ability, produce different digital experiences in focus. Critical data studies and surveillance theory add depth to this discussion, looking into the ways that algorithmic governance, data extraction, and biometric infrastructures also reproduce or contest systemic inequalities, specifically within contexts with asymmetrical state–citizen and platform–user relations. Digital citizenship theory reinforces the framing by understanding online participation as not simply access to technology but as a complex constellation of rights, responsibilities, and socio-technical entitlements influenced by institutional arrangements, public policy, and shared cultural norms. These paradigms collectively generate a multifaceted analytical framework that allows a complex exploration of women’s agency, vulnerability, and empowerment in the context of AI-driven digital ecosystems across the Global North and Global South.

Gendered Digital Citizenship: Definitions, Debates, and Global Frameworks

Gendered digital citizenship refers to how individuals, particularly women, gender-diverse individuals, and marginalized groups exercise rights, agency, and participation in digital environments shaped by socio-technical power structures. Rooted in broader theories of citizenship, the concept extends beyond access to digital tools, emphasizing the quality of participation, the distribution of digital rights, and the capacity to interact safely and autonomously within technologically mediated public spheres. Scholars argue that digital citizenship is inherently gendered because technological infrastructures, platform logics, and data-driven systems reproduce the social hierarchies, biases, and exclusions present in offline contexts. Thus, gendered digital citizenship interrogates who is included or excluded, how digital harms are unevenly distributed, and how gender norms shape one’s online visibility, vulnerability, and voice.

Debates within the field highlight three major tensions. First, while digital technologies have expanded opportunities for civic engagement, entrepreneurship, and political expression, they have simultaneously given rise to technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), including online harassment, stalking, non-consensual image circulation, and algorithmic discrimination. Second, the promise of digital empowerment is unevenly realized across intersections of class, caste, race, age, and geography, emphasizing that digital citizenship is a layered and unequal experience. Third, feminist scholars critique the assumption of neutrality in AI and platform governance, arguing instead that digital systems embed gendered assumptions that shape decision-making outcomes, surveillance practices, and content moderation.

Global frameworks increasingly recognize gendered digital citizenship as central to digital rights and democratic participation. The United Nations’ Beijing+25, UNESCO’s Internet Universality ROAM Principles, the EU’s Digital Services Act and GDPR, and UN Women’s Global Alliance on Feminist AI emphasize rights-based, inclusive, and safe digital ecosystems. These frameworks collectively foreground universal digital rights

access, privacy, security, freedom from violence, and equitable participation, while acknowledging that structural inequalities must be addressed to achieve substantive equality. Despite these global commitments, significant implementation gaps persist, particularly in the Global South, where infrastructural disparities, socio-cultural norms, and weak regulatory mechanisms undermine women's ability to exercise full digital citizenship.

Hence, gendered digital citizenship provides a critical analytical lens for understanding how power operates across digital infrastructures and how women navigate the opportunities and risks embedded in AI-driven societies. It underscores the need for feminist, intersectional, and rights-based approaches to ensure that emerging digital futures are inclusive, democratic, and socially just.

Feminist Technoscience

Feminist technoscience, as articulated most vividly by Judy Wajcman (2004), can be seen as a critical lens to understand how technologies are interwoven with the social relations that shape their design and use. According to Wajcman, technological systems are neither neutral nor autonomous, but rather deeply embedded within gendered power structures: they favor specific forms of knowledge, labour, and agency over others. From this perspective, one can identify the cultural assumptions, institutional priorities, and ideological biases embedded within the AI systems, digital platforms, and algorithmic governance processes of the producing societies. In the absence of explicit critical scrutiny, these embedded structures risk reinforcing and perpetuating patriarchal norms. As such, feminist technoscience emphasizes the co-construction of gender and technology, whereby women are not just passive recipients of technological change but active actors who negotiate, resist, and reinterpret digital systems in their everyday lives. Thus, within the framework of gendered digital citizenship, it foregrounds how these AI-mediated infrastructures shape women's experiences of visibility, safety, labour, and rights online, while emphasising the transformative nature of inclusive design, feminist innovation, and participatory technology governance.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, which was originally articulated in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers an important perspective for appreciating the way that women's online experiences are formed by various intersecting power relations. In terms of digital citizenship, intersectionality asserts that online participation, exposure to risk, and the accessibility of digital rights are not equal for all women but are mediated by identities including caste, class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, and disability. Taking an intersectional angle helps us to understand how algorithmic systems may disproportionately profile or marginalize women who meet the intersections of multiple vulnerabilities (Dalit women in India, for instance, or migrant women in Sweden, for example), thereby reinforcing systemic exclusion and/or exacerbating the presence of online harassment. This

framework is critical for capturing the nuanced effects of digital governance, AI-driven technologies, and platform policies in various socio-cultural contexts.

Critical Data Studies and Surveillance Theory

Critical Data Studies (CDS) and surveillance theory provide the basic understanding of power in the structures formed by digital infrastructure, that is, in digital power structures. Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of surveillance and discipline offers a conceptual framework for considering how digital systems are now contemporary “panoptic” regimes that normalise permanent visibility, the extraction of data, and scrutiny of behaviour. Expanding upon this argument, Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) concept of “surveillance capitalism” extends this to explain how digital platforms commodify personal data and shape behaviours via algorithmic design. And in gendered contexts, these mechanisms have deep-rooted implications: AI used for tracking, biometric systems, predictive policing, and platform algorithms can expose women to new vulnerabilities, whether by amplifying stereotypes, enabling stalking, or reinforcing socio-political biases. When taken together, these theories can inform how digital citizenship is shaped by larger regimes of power, commercial imperatives, and asymmetrical data relations that shape women's agency and autonomy online.

Human Rights and Digital Rights Frameworks (EU GDPR, 2016; UN Resolutions)

International human rights norms offer an appropriate normative base for protecting women's digital citizenship. The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016) lays out the groundwork for data privacy, consent, accountability, and user control and provides means of providing protection against algorithmic harm and unlawful profiling. Equally, the UN resolutions on online violence against women and digital rights (such as the UN Human Rights Council resolutions adopted from 2012 onwards) stress the responsibility of states for the promotion of the safety and privacy of citizens in digital contexts. These frameworks highlight the values of autonomy, dignity, and non-discrimination, and are necessary in setting benchmarks to which national policy in India and Sweden is compared. If applied on a relative basis, they highlight dissimilarities in data governance, legal protection, and institutional responses, and highlight the shared need for respecting women's rights within AI-mediated spaces.

Analytical Framework for Comparing India and Sweden

To conduct a comparative analysis of gendered digital citizenship in India and Sweden in a systematic way, this research uses a multi-level analytical framework that combines socio-technical, legal, and cultural factors simultaneously. At a structural level, it analyses the domestic digital governance models, including India's large-scale biometric infrastructures (e.g., Aadhaar) and Sweden's digitally mature welfare systems (e.g., BankID) to examine how policy architectures shape women's data rights and exposure to algorithmic decision-making. From an institutional perspective, it assesses the strength

of regulatory safeguards, cybercrime enforcement, welfare technologies, and AI ethics guidelines within each country. Experientially, it examines women's day-to-day encounters with digital systems, online risks, and coping strategies, with a focus on intersectional differences. This comparative analysis emphasises how distinct development paths, with India as a rapidly digitising Global South democracy and Sweden as a technologically advanced welfare state, yield different prospects, limitations, and governance challenges for women as they traverse the AI-driven digital ecosystem.

India: Rapid Digitization, Aadhaar, Digital India, and Cyber Governance Frameworks.

India has experienced one of the biggest digital transformations due to flagship initiatives like Digital India (2015) towards the digital transformation goals of connecting the masses to a digital life, digital literacy, and e-governance for a sustainable future. With digital ID as the biggest project in the world, Aadhaar, the biometric identification system behind the country, has come to play a central role in the delivery of public services, financial inclusion, and welfare distribution. India's emerging cyber governance architecture, which now includes the Information Technology Act (2000), the CERT-In framework, and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023), serves as a measure of how the state is increasingly committed to protecting digital ecosystems in the context of growing online cybercrime and gender-based violence. So far, substantial progress has been made, but issues of digital literacy gaps, infrastructural inequalities, and a lack of institutional responsiveness exist that define the boundaries of gendered digital citizenship.

Sweden: Advanced Welfare State, BankID, AI Ethics, and GDPR Compliance

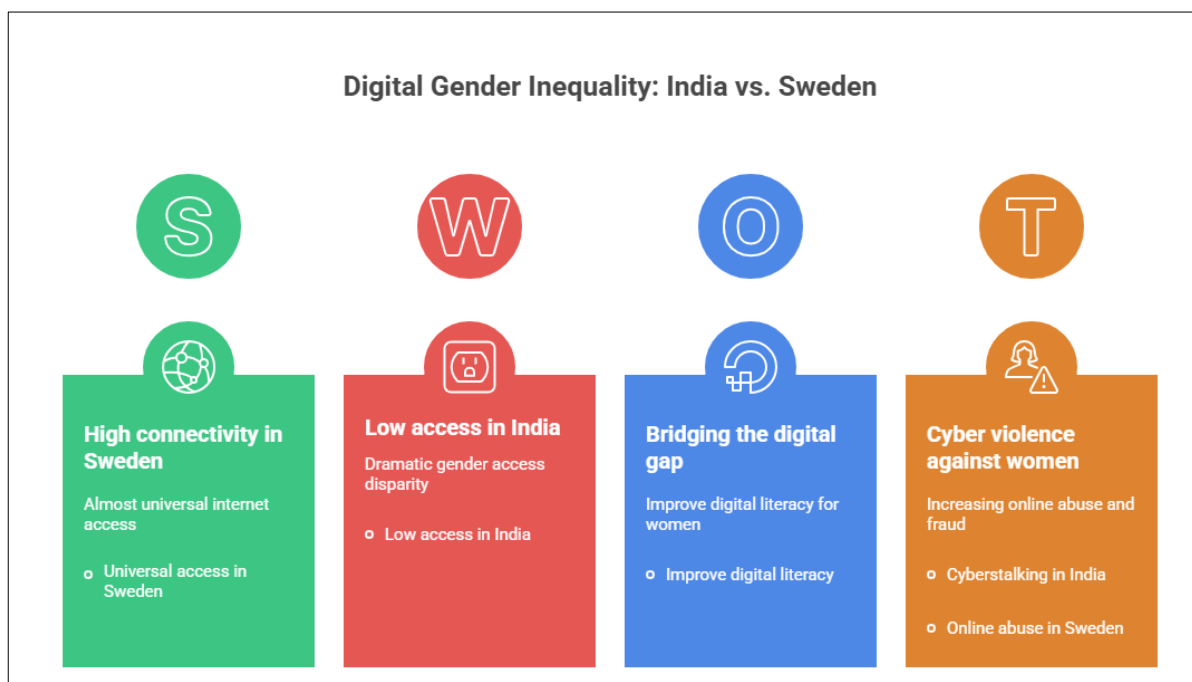
Sweden is among the most digitally advanced welfare states in the world, with connectivity that is near-universal, a deep well of social safeguards, and a rights-based philosophy of governance with respect to technologies. Its widely adopted BankID digital identification system allows safe and secure access to financial services, e-governance platforms, and everyday transactions, underpinned by sound cybersecurity measures. The political landscape in Sweden falls under the umbrella of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which has well-established mechanisms for privacy, consent, and data minimization, making it an institutional model of rights-based digital governance. Sweden's AI ethics strategy is also based on transparency, fairness, and accountability, with clear commitments to making sure that algorithmic outcomes are not discriminatory. Nevertheless, Swedish women are still being harassed online and having their privacy threatened and even experiencing newly uncovered algorithmic biases in the digital spaces, indicating that even a highly regulated digital environment remains a hard climb for achieving gender-equitable digital citizenship.

Digital Gender Gap Statistics: Internet Access, Digital Literacy, and Cybercrime Trends

Patterns of digital gender inequality are very disparate between India and Sweden. National surveys indicate that women’s internet access remains dramatically less than men’s in India, especially among rural women, marginalized caste groups, and low-income households. Digital literacy disparities remain, making women even more susceptible to misinformation, fraud, and cyber harassment. India’s National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports on increasing cases of cyberstalking, morphing, non-consensual image circulation, and financial fraud against women. Conversely, Sweden demonstrates near-universal connectivity, with little gender disparity with reference to access. Yet evidence from Swedish police reports and European Union studies shows that women continue to face disproportionate levels of online abuse, doxxing, and sexually explicit threats. Comparative data, therefore, indicate that digital gender inequalities are shaped by socio-economic context: in India by restricted access and inequality, and in Sweden by enduring gender-based violence within advanced digital environments.

Contrasting Cultural, Institutional, and Socio-Political Environments

India and Sweden offer two very different cultural and institutional environments, which make them highly complementary in approaching the issue of gendered digital citizenship. A socio-political landscape of linguistic diversity, caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and uneven state capacity in India constrains women’s use of digital technologies and institutional supports. Social conventions about gendered mobility, propriety, and household roles inhibit women’s digital agency. Sweden, on the other hand, operates within a highly egalitarian, secular, and welfare-oriented framework, thanks to strong gender equality policies and a culture of individual rights. However,



Swedish society is not immune to gendered power structures: online misogyny, xenophobia, and algorithmic discrimination persist even within a socially progressive

environment. These differences reinforce the argument that digital citizenship is something that is jointly constructed by cultural norms, institutions' capacities, and political traditions, all requiring contextually-appropriate cross-national studies of women's digital practices.

The figure presents a comparative SWOT framework for understanding digital gender inequality in India and Sweden. Sweden's near-universal connectivity constitutes a structural strength, whereas India's persistent gendered disparities in digital access reflect a critical weakness. Opportunities lie in expanding women's digital literacy and equitable access—most urgently in India, alongside continued gender-responsive digital governance in Sweden. Nevertheless, growing cyber violence against women across both contexts represents a significant and shared threat.

Research Methodology

The research design for this study is comparative in nature, which enables a systematic exploration of the gendered aspects of digital citizenship in India (Varanasi and New Delhi) and Sweden (Karlstad and Stockholm), as the two countries have different technological standards, regulatory frameworks, and socio-cultural contexts. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative research, policy analysis, and secondary statistical data to develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of women within AI-mediated digital systems is adopted. The qualitative part involves semi-structured interviews with women users (18-30) from various socio-economic and demographic backgrounds, providing rich, situated views of online safety, privacy, data rights, and algorithmic harms. The study conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with women participants (18–30 years)—20 in India and 20 in Sweden, selected to reflect varied socio-economic and demographic contexts. The sample enabled thematic saturation and supported a rigorous comparative analysis of perceptions of online safety, privacy, data governance, and algorithmic harm across the two national settings. These stories are augmented by digital ethnography that examines women's engagement, dialogues, and self-representation in key cyber spaces, including those related to algorithmic visibility, content moderation, and platform-based risks. The policy analysis element studies relevant legislation, regulation, and guidelines, such as India's Digital India programme, Aadhaar architecture, and cyber governance frameworks, and Sweden's GDPR-aligned digital rights regime, BankID infrastructure, and national AI ethics frameworks. For context, our research uses secondary data (NCRB cybercrime statistics (India), Eurostat digital inclusion indicators (EU/Sweden), global datasets from UN Women, Pew Research Center, and international organizations). A purposive sampling approach ensures that age, education, class, caste/ethnicity, and urban-rural divides are fully represented, indicating an intersectional pattern in digital access and algorithmic susceptibility. There is rigorous ethical consideration at all stages of the research, including informed consent, anonymization of sensitive data, compliance with cross-national data protection standards, and culturally competent interviewing. Particular attention is given to managing cross-country differences in digital norms,

privacy expectations, and legal protections, so that comparative analysis remains contextually rooted, methodologically robust, and ethically sound.

Key Findings

Insights from the comparative analysis of India and Sweden allow us to derive nuanced reflections on how women navigate digital ecosystems formed by diverse socio-technical infrastructures, governance structures, and cultural norms. These findings are examined in relation to five overarching thematic areas that offer depth to the development of gendered digital citizenship in the age of AI.

Theme A: Digital Access, Literacy, and Inclusion

The two countries' patterns of digital access differ sharply from each other. In India, inequalities in digital participation are still sharply stratified by class, caste, geography, and gender, and rural and marginalized communities possess less literacy and connectivity than the urban elite. Though digitization has accelerated rapidly, and there have been significant state efforts with Digital India to expand the participation of women, existing socio-economic hierarchies restrict women's inclusion. On the contrary, Sweden shows consistently high levels of access and digital literacy among all demographic groups, yet gender-related challenges remain, notably around confidence in navigating AI-mediated systems, privacy issues, and disparities in older women's technology proficiency.

Theme B: Harassment on the Web and Violence with Technology

Both contexts present common types of online harassment, albeit with different intensity, typology, and institutional responses. In India, women experience frequent cyberstalking, impersonation, and non-consensual image sharing as well as caste-gender-religion related abuse exacerbated by stigma and low trust and reporting to the law.

Theme C: Privacy, Data Rights and Trust in Institutions

One major axis of difference is the governance of personal data. There are fears, among Indian women in particular, that Aadhaar data practices, repeated data leaks, and lax protection of privacy are eroding trust in digital infrastructures. Many participants are worried about the misuse of biometrics and the lack of redressal mechanisms. Sweden, while enjoying the protections the European Union provides under GDPR, can now ensure stronger regulations; however, new worries about the existence of AI-driven surveillance systems, facial recognition, and predictive models, or the future of the future's threats, indicate that nascent weaknesses will emerge. Both countries suffer from a trust shortfall in opaque algorithmic processes despite better institutional guardrails.

Theme D: Algorithmic Bias and Platform Governance

In both cases, algorithmic mechanisms of the system exhibit gendered biases affecting online visibility, content moderation, and safety. Women said the moderation tools used by AI inconsistently flag abuse and, in fact, disproportionately repress feminist content or speech with cultural implications. The comparative analysis reveals that although Swedish institutions enjoy a higher regulatory scrutiny and corporate compliance, platform governance is fragmented. In India, the lack of transparency regarding moderation, the linguistic limitation of generative AI models, and the weak grievance mechanism compound gendered harms.

Theme E: Women's Strategies, Agency, and Resilience

Even against structural limitations, women in both countries show remarkable resilience and agency. To navigate online threats, Indian participants rely on informal networks of care, selective anonymity, and community-oriented feminist initiatives for assistance. Swedish women use institutional channels, digital literacy programmes, and structured reporting tools while employing feminist digital activism to challenge misogynistic cultures online. Women in each context articulate their strategies for adaptive engagement, balancing the need to engage with risk management and the demand for safer, more equitable digital spaces.

Discussion

The implications of the findings of this comparative study for global notions of digital governance and ethical regulation of artificial intelligence illuminate the extent to which algorithmic systems increasingly mediate women's everyday experiences of citizenship, visibility, and vulnerability online. The analysis shows that gender, power, and technology intertwine in intricate ways: AI-based infrastructures and platform architectures often replicate existing social hierarchies, perpetuate prejudices built into data, and fail to adequately protect women from online harms, even in contexts with strong regulatory safeguards such as Sweden. Meanwhile, India's fast transition to digital underscores how socio-economic inequalities, infrastructural divides, and weak institutional accountability compound gendered risks in digital spaces. These results reinforce the importance of rethinking the practice of digital citizenship in feminist and rights-related registers that focus on autonomy, privacy, and equal participation over access to technology itself. That reframing goes beyond what's technically feasible to tackle the more structural forces of inequality, such as data colonialism, surveillance capitalism, and algorithmic opacity, which limit real digital agency. Viewed through feminist technoscience, intersectionality, and global governance, this study contributes to international studies by showing how multi-scalar comparative analysis illuminates the formation of gendered digital futures in varied political and cultural settings. It further contends that embedding gender-sensitive design, transparency, accountability, and participatory governance within global AI governance is essential for securing substantive rights and protections for women globally.

Policy Recommendations

Enhancing AI Ethics and Transparency

Government and technopreneurs need to implement gender-sensitive AI ethics frameworks that promote explainability, fairness, and accountability. This will comprise compulsory algorithmic audits to identify gender bias, clear data traceability disclosure, model decision channels, and implementable standards for ethical AI design and practice, in both India and Sweden. Independent oversight bodies and standards for cross-border ethical review can help ensure that AI technologies are respectful of women's autonomy, dignity, and digital rights in the digital era, too.

Reforms with a Gender Sensitivity to the Governance of Platforms

Social media platforms and digital intermediaries should bring some gender-responsive mechanisms, proactive identification of misogynistic content, nuanced regulation options tailored to the cultural context, and rapid responses for online abuse victims to come first. The platforms can also engage local women's rights groups and digital safety experts in the co-design of new safety tools so that moderation mechanisms are powerful not just technically but also socially. There needs to be clearer language on content removal, appeal rights, and transparency reporting across countries.

Improving the education of digital literacy and cyber safety

Both India and Sweden are well placed to benefit from holistic and intersectional digital literacy initiatives that prepare women and girls with the understanding to traverse the internet safely. These might range from how to set privacy, how to authenticate securely, or identify online scams, algorithmic risks, and data rights. Community-led workshops, school curricula, and workplace training modules should be scaled to include the most at-risk, e.g., first-generation digital users, migrants, and rural residents.

Strengthening institutional processes for reporting and redress

A more effective redressal will depend on gender sensitive and well-resourced institutional infrastructures that can report online abuse, cyberstalking, data breaches, and identity theft. The police, cybercrime, and judicial agencies will increasingly have to be trained in how to respond to digital gender-based violence and provide empathetic, victim-centered support. New hotlines, multilingual complaint portals, and time-bound resolutions should be implemented, and punishment for non-compliance by digital platforms and data processors should be tightened.

Cross-Country Policy Learning: India ↔ Sweden

A structured dialogue between India and Sweden gives a basis for mutual understanding of inclusive digital governance. Sweden can also offer insights on GDPR enforcement,

digital welfare systems, and rights-based regulation of AI. India's national digital infrastructure on a big scale: Aadhaar, Digital India, UPI, and cutting-edge digital literacy programs give Sweden a valuable reference point on how to handle AI uptake and platforms in general. Establishing bilateral research collaborations, policy exchanges, and joint regulatory workshops will strengthen global knowledge-sharing on gender-equitable digital futures.

Conclusion:

The comparison between the different versions of gendered digital citizenship in India and Sweden highlights the complex and dynamic nature of how AI-driven infrastructures in both countries, data governance regimes, and socio-cultural norms inform women's experiences of rights, safety, and autonomy in digital spaces. Indeed, even though both nations have taken important steps to accelerate digital inclusion (India's huge efforts – Digital India and Aadhaar-enabled services, and Sweden with its thoroughly digitized welfare setup, solid GDPR system), women still grapple with structural inequalities, algorithmic biases, and disparate institutional protections. The evidence indicates that digital citizenship is not neutral or universally accessible, but mediated by intersecting axes of class, caste, race, gender, geography, and technological design. India's swift digitalisation both facilitated access and laid the ground for vulnerability through a lack of infrastructure, low digital literacy of people at the margins, and inadequate enforcement of protections in cyberspace. Sweden, however, has evolved governance mechanisms; the country is now also facing increasing fear behind online harassment and AI-driven surveillance, showing that technological sophistication is not the sole means to a fair outcome. In both cultures, the studies reveal how algorithmic governance may reproduce existing social hierarchies untempered by oversight and how trust in digital systems among women has been linked with feelings of safety, privacy, and institutional responsiveness. This study advances international discussions on digital rights, feminist technology studies, and AI ethics and highlights the need for gender sensitive digital governance frameworks, which would reflect multiple cultural, political, and socio-economic factors. By illuminating women's agency, resilience strategies, and grassroots models of digital activism, the study reinforces the fact that lived experience must be at the center of the creation of ethical and inclusive digital futures. In the end, our findings make clear the necessity for continuing international education, inclusive policy-making, and intersectional methods of digital governance; the need for fair distribution of AI and digital transformation, as well as promotion of meaningful, active, and secure digital citizenship for women in varying societies in an age of AI.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Whilst the proclamation of Tehran does not make a mention of NGO participation, there was an element of NGO participation in the conference, albeit limited to a consultative capacity. 53 NGOs participated in this capacity, and four others were invited by the Preparatory Committee of the Conference (Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler 1998).

ⁱⁱ For a detailed discussion, refer to March & Olsen, 1998, and Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Norm Entrepreneurs are actors who are members of a social group and introduce new ideas to it or 'create' issues. They often (re)construct issues using a combination of information and emotional persuasion. Once introduced, a new norm competes with already existing norms that promote alternate standards of appropriateness. Norm entrepreneurs have the difficult task of de-bunking existing logics of appropriateness and interest, and convincing a critical number of group members to invest instead in the 'better' logic of the new norm (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

^{iv} Rein and Schon defined framing in their 1993 work, *Reframing Policy Discourse*, as: "Framing can be understood broadly as "a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading, and acting" (Rein, M. and Schön, 1993; 146). Chong and Druckman observe that framing effects "occur when (often small) changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes large) changes of opinion" (Chong and Druckman 2007; 104). Charnysh, Lloyd, and Simmons explain that "Whether employed consciously or not, frames allow individuals to filter information to make some of its aspects more salient than others." (Charnysh, Lloyd, and Simmons 2015; 327). For a detailed discussion on frames and the impact of issue framing/frame construction/frame alignment, see Rein, M. and Schön 1993; Charnysh, Lloyd and Simmons 2015; Chong and Druckman 2007.

^v According to Finnemore and Sikkink, "Institutionalization of a particular norm involves it being embedded in a structure of rules, regulations, practices, etc. This ensures an inter-subjective understanding of exactly what the norm means, compliance with it, observation for norm deviation, and mechanisms to impose sanctions/costs on those who deviate." (1998). For more, see Goldstein and Keohane 1993, and Katzenstein 1996.

^{vi} Stephen Lewis and Refeuddin Ahmed were former ambassadors and had worked in various capacities at the UN. Ahmed had, in the past, served as the Chef du Cabinet for UN Secretary-General Waldheim. He was also the former Associate Administrator of UNDP, former Ambassador of Pakistan, and the former head of ESCAP. Stephen Lewis, on the other hand, had served as the former Canadian Ambassador to the UN. At the UN, he served at various points in his career as the former Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF and former SRSF on AIDS in Africa. Lewis also had experience with lobbying with the council members, as he had worked on persuading the council to pass a resolution on Children in Conflict in 1998.

^{vii} The concept of 'door openers' is the opposite of that of 'gatekeepers' which was introduced and described by RW Connell as "...the very gender inequalities in economic assets, political power, and cultural authority, as well as the means of coercion, that gender reforms intend to change, currently mean that men (often specific groups of men) control most of the resources required to implement women's claims

for justice. Men and boys are thus in significant ways gatekeepers for gender equality. Whether they are willing to open the gates for major reforms is an important strategic question” (Connell et al., 2005)

^{viii} *The Arria meeting is named after Ambassador Diego Arria, who came up with this format of meetings to allow Security Council members to meet civil society groups and NGOs and hear them on important issues which could not be included in the council’s agenda (United Nations, 2002). The United Nations states that the Arria formula meetings are “very informal, confidential gatherings which enable Security Council members to have a frank and private exchange of views, within a flexible procedural framework, with persons whom the inviting member or members of the Council (who also act as the facilitators or conveners) believe it would be beneficial to hear and/or to whom they may wish to convey a message.” (United Nations Security Council, 2019a).*

^{ix} *Goetz, Anne Marie. Clinical Professor, Centre for Global Affairs, New York University (since 2014); former Policy Director of Governance, Peace and Security at UNIFEM (2005–2011) and later UN Women. She played a key role in advancing UN Security Council engagement on conflict-related sexual violence and was instrumental in the adoption of Resolution 1820.*

^x *Uma Chakravarti. 2018. Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens.*

^{xi} *Izzat can be comprehended as a representation of reputation and honor. In the South Asian context, it primarily pertains to the preservation of family honor, which must remain unblemished and pristine.*

^{xii} *“Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) & Anr. Vs. Union of India & Ors.”*

^{xiii} *In Committee report ‘A Free and Fair Digital Economy: Protecting Privacy, Empowering Indians’, 2018*

^{xiv} *“Data Principal” means the individual to whom the personal data relates and where such individual is— (i) a child, includes the parents or lawful guardian of such a child; (ii) a person with disability, includes her lawful guardian, acting on her behalf;*

^{xv} *Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019*

^{xvi} *“Significant Data Fiduciary” means any Data Fiduciary or class of Data Fiduciaries as may be notified by the Central Government*

^{xvii} *“Data Fiduciary” means any person who alone or in conjunction with other persons determines the purpose and means of processing of personal data;*

^{xviii} *Associated with National Campaign for Peoples’ Right to Information and the Satark Nagrik Sangathan*

^{xix} *I am using the term “lowered-caste” instead of “lower caste” deliberately, as inspired by Dejaeghere and Arur (2020). They have rightly pointed out that the former term highlights the agency of the oppressor who creates a ‘lower caste’, in opposition to the latter wording, which makes the caste hierarchy appear almost as a natural phenomenon.*

^{xx} *In this chapter, I will focus on girls from the scheduled castes, because in my work as a teacher trainer and head of a school in an urban setting in Uttar Pradesh, a few of the lowered castes we work with belong to the scheduled tribes, but to the scheduled castes. The situation of scheduled tribes still living in communities where they are in the majority might pose different problems.*

^{xxi} *While revising the conference paper I am basing this chapter on, I got the news that 7-year-old Vishnu, Pooja's brother, died on 15.6.2016. Being severely malnourished all his life, he had the physical appearance of a 3-year-old. He died alone in a tent; both parents were drunk outside and didn't realize until later that he was dead. Reason unknown. It is now only 5 children of this family still being alive – out of 13.*

^{xxii} *I have been a head teacher at this school since 2010 and, thus, am personally and professionally involved in this institution. I do not draw a salary or any kind of financial remuneration from this voluntary position.*

^{xxiii} *Forum theatre is an art form where the actors show a problem of a community and ask the spectators to come onto the stage and help solve it (Boal, 2002).*

^{xxiv} *In addition, they learn practical household skills they wouldn't have been able to learn at home, for the simple reason that most of our children do not have many material possessions (such as toilets, toys, laptops, or books).*

^{xxv} *During the Covid-19 pandemic, despite sickness and financial difficulties, these girls have taken over the responsibilities usually reserved for parents: They accompany sick relatives to the hospital. Since their own schools were closed, they helped younger siblings and relatives from the street to stay with them and take care of them 24/7 for over a year now.*