

DATAFIED INEQUALITIES AND GENDERED HARMS: RETHINKING DIGITAL INCLUSION THROUGH SDG 5 IN INDIA

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Abstract:

India's digital development trajectory is increasingly seen as a critical enabler of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Digital inclusion is rightly positioned at the heart of this transformation, offering opportunities for voice, participation, and economic empowerment. However, meaningful inclusion requires more than connectivity. As Nancy Fraser (2000) asserts, "parity of participation" depends not only on access but on the removal of structural barriers that hinder equal engagement. This paper explores how India's data-driven digital shift, while progressive in intent, often reproduces gendered inequalities unless consciously shaped by feminist, rights-based principles. According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (2023), Indian women are 19% less likely to own smartphones and 28% less likely to access mobile internet compared to men. The National Crime Records Bureau (2022) reports a 45% increase in cybercrimes against women, including harassment, stalking, and image-based abuse. These trends underscore the urgency of embedding safeguards, representation, and justice within digital policy frameworks. Drawing on the works of Safiya Umoja Noble and Ruha Benjamin, and grounded in feminist digital justice, this paper emphasizes that technologies are not inherently neutral but can be reimagined to foster equity and empowerment. The study employs a qualitative methodology, including policy analysis and thematic review of secondary data, to explore how digital inclusion can evolve beyond metrics to embody dignity, safety, and agency. It asks: How can we build digital infrastructures that reflect feminist values? What does it mean to be meaningfully connected? And how might SDG 5 inspire a more inclusive, secure, and just digital future for all women in India? It concludes by urging policymakers to embed SDG 5 into the core of digital policy design, ensuring that inclusion is not only technical but transformative. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." The future of digital India must be intersectional, inclusive, and just

Keywords: SDG 5, Digital Inclusion, Gender Equality, Datafied Inequality, Feminist Digital Governance, Gendered Cyber Harms, Algorithmic Bias, Intersectionality, Digital Rights, India.

I. Introduction

Beyond Connectivity—Reframing Digital Inclusion through a Feminist Lens

India is increasingly becoming digitalized at a rapid rate, which is often described as a revolutionary means of socio-economic growth, governance, as well as citizens. Digital inclusion is presented as one of the foundations of the progress, and it took a prominent position in national policies like Digital India, BharatNet, and PMGDISHA, as the state is willing to create an equitable, knowledge-based society. As part of the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goal 5 (SDG 5) that promotes gender equality and encourages empowerment among all women and girls, digital inclusion has commonly become a driver towards the improvement of women. It guarantees access to education, health services and livelihoods and being able to take part in democratic practices. Nevertheless, they conceal much of the underlying structural inequality that can be infested by digital ecosystems. At the same time as the proliferation of the internet and mobile network connectivity is vital, the unitary concentration on the scale of infrastructural provisions and indicators of penetration masks the material realities of digital deprivation. Only access does not mean that there can be any meaningful participation. Equality of participation demands a sense of distributive justice as well as acknowledgment of social and cultural inequalities that suppress total inclusion as in the case of parity of participation as advanced by Nancy Fraser (2000). This in the Indian context implies considering the way gender interrelates with caste, class, religion, region and disability forming the lines of technological reach and control. As shown in the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (2023), Indian women have a 19 percent lesser chance to possess smartphone ownership as well as use mobile internet, compared to the male population. Such inequalities are not only technical but highly socio-political as they expose some unfathomable patterns of patriarchy, surveillance, and structural negligence.

Moreover, with the development of digital infrastructures, new gender-based harmful outcomes have appeared. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2022), crimes that women have experienced at a 45 percent increase are cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse, doxxing, and online harassment. Such forms of violence cannot be subtracted as peripheral exceptions but are the very central features of the way power flows in its digital manifestations. Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) stated that digital infrastructures are not neutral and full of historical and cultural prejudices that tend to reinforce the preexisting hierarchies instead of breaking them down. The implementation of algorithms, content moderation systems, or digital ID does not prioritize a feminist, intersectional approach, in which case they risk contributing to more exclusion and the exclusion of more people. Through the critical questioning of the paradox of digital empowerment and datafied inequality, this paper analyses the notion of datafication as an area to consider and look at as a contemporary guide to the question of inequality. It states that India is rapidly transitioning to a digital economy fuelled by data and despite its advancement in terms of development intentions (positive), gender harms are repeatedly reinforced unless influenced by feminist, rights-based, ethics-oriented guidelines. Based on interdisciplinary theory, policy analysis, and empirical reports, it questions the ways in which digital inclusion will have to be reconsidered to move beyond connectivity, and focus, instead, on such values as dignity, safety, and agency.

The central questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. How do datafied systems perpetuate structural inequalities, particularly for women and marginalized groups in India?
2. What does meaningful inclusion look like in a context marked by intersecting forms of social disadvantage?
3. How can SDG 5 be embedded not only in rhetoric but in the design and governance of digital infrastructures?

Through the convergence of the biases of algorithmic discrimination, digital violence, infrastructural exclusions, and gender digital divide, the paper demands a change of policy and debates of which guidance will place an emphasis on digital development aligned with the

transformative feminist ethics, participatory governance, and intersectional justice. This is not a single-issue struggle as Audre Lorde reminds us of because we do not live single issue lives. In an age when more lives have become mediated by data, the future of digital inclusion in India will have to be intersectional, intersectional, and radically redefined.

II. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Digital Justice, Intersectionality, and Ethical Reimagining

The paper draws upon a feminist framework of digital justice, a movement that critiques the dominant power structures of technology that present digital innovation as progressive or neutral. It does not just focus on how inclusion is to be brought about, but it puts emphasis on the social, political, and ethical aspects of technology on who will be included, in what ways, and to what extent. The central pillars of this framework are the feminist arguments to the dominance of algorithmic power and the data regime. As Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) elegantly shows in *Algorithms of Oppression*, search engines and content algorithms are not neutral examples of technological construction but rather a tool to boost racial and gender preferences that exist in society. Similarly, the so-called New Jim Code (Benjamin, 2019) as introduced by Ruha Benjamin reveals the reinsertion of the social stratification in the form of innovative technologies. Benjamin proposes a more critical exploration of discourses and logics of design pushing towards discrimination and d Onford, Catherine DIgnazio, and Lauren Klein (2020) in *Data Feminism* believe that in the name of achieving greater equity, a re-conceptualisation of data science must deploy the feminist principles of being constantly self-conscious, connected to the concept of justice as well as being aware of situations.

To address the multi-dimensional aspects of digital exclusion in India, the paper would be driven by the thoughts of Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) who elaborates on intersectionality meaning the cross-cutting nature of systems of power, which defines unequal accessibility and exposure to digital exclusion. Women do not have a singular experience related to technology, as other conditions are involved, such as caste, class, religion, sexuality, ability, and so on. The picture is different, for example, Dalit/Adivasi women mostly become invisible to the algorithm, and Muslim women are over-policed and trolled online (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2023). The tripartite model of redistribution, recognition, and representation proposed by Nancy Fraser (2000) proves to be extremely relevant at this point because she claims that to be able to take an active part in the common life, it is essential to remove financial and cultural barriers in addition to gaining a voice.

The state surveillance and data extraction logics are further theorized based on the concept of Foucauldian governmentality and the new literature on the phenomenon of the data colonialism. In his work on power, Michel Foucault (1977 78) outlines how governing happens through micro technologies of power, which normalize subjects to be identified digitally, checked biologically, and policed predictively, to mention just these three technologies. Large-scale systems like Aadhaar in the Indian context have created new exclusions especially among the women belonging to marginalized communities (Khera, 2019).

Capping this, Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) theorize data colonialism as modern-day domination in which the life of humans is colonized and reduced to economic currency by its continuous extraction. Through these frameworks, the potential digital governance venture in India can take the new colonial logic unless strategically constructed. The framework is complemented by critiques of exclusion, in addition to the feminist ethics of care that have been developed by Joan Tronto (1993) and Virginia Held (2006). According to these scholars,

establishing inclusive and responsive technologies needs ethical frameworks based on care, as opposed to general forms of rationality or profit maximization, which is needed. In India, Asha Achuthan (2011) states that the technological design has a history of masculinist and caste-blind imaginaries and then asks to shift the epistemic to embodiment and pluralistic knowledges. In the context of digital inclusion, this can be applied by the paper arguing that a feminist approach of AI ethics must be based on accountability, attention, and reliance on the issue of vulnerability rather than the efficiency. The ideas of cyberfeminism are also introduced in this part of the work and consider how digital technologies may be used as the means of resistance.

The Cyborg Manifesto by Donna Haraway (1985) dismisses binary categorizations and uses the concept of hybridity as the realm of feminist practices. Engaging with cyberfeminism in the Indian context, Radhika Gajjala (2012) has developed the concept of subaltern cyberfeminism where she experiments on how South Asian women learn to trade marginality and regain voice on the internet. These viewpoints hold that the digital environment is a space of both harm and subversion that is anchored by the marginalized communities who resist the access to exclusionary logics and formulate other worlds. Lastly, Global South feminist praxis which is represented among others by Naila Kabeer (1999, 2005) and Bina Agarwal (2010) also informs the framework. Kabeer categorizes access into nominal access and substantive empowerment; however, choice, voice and capability to transform are essential aspects highlighted. One of the key insights that Agarwal has contributed to knowledge about participatory governance and enhancing collective capabilities is how digital policies need to extend beyond service delivery to enable the ecosystem.

That is in line with the spirit of SDG 5 that projects gender equality to be a fundamental and ethical transformation and not a technical solution. All these theories and thinkers generate a strong conceptual framework on which the paradigm of digital inclusion in India can be interrogated. They demand a rethink in favour of indicators of connectivity and adoption of a model that is totally based on dignity, safety, and agency a model that is not only sensitive to gender-based conditions but transformative to it as well.

III. Mapping Datafied Inequalities in India: Access, Exclusion, and Harm

1. Gender Gaps in Access and Usage

Despite the proliferation of mobile and internet services, a significant gender digital divide persists. According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (2023): Indian women are 19% less likely to own a smartphone compared to men. They are 28% less likely to access mobile internet, despite rising digital dependency during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Digital literacy and confidence in using technology remain markedly lower among women, especially those in rural areas or with limited education.

These disparities are not just about affordability or infrastructure—they are shaped by social norms, household surveillance, and structural gender roles. Many women lack autonomy in device use, are monitored by family members, or are discouraged from online engagement due to fears of reputational harm. This form of “forced digital invisibility” limits their participation in digital economies, governance, and public discourse.

2. Cybercrime and Gender-Based Digital Harms

Parallel to these access gaps is the alarming rise in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). The National Crime Records Bureau (2022) reports:

A 45% increase in cybercrimes against women over five years.

Crimes include online stalking, identity theft, image-based sexual abuse, deepfake pornography, and non-consensual surveillance.

Platforms often fail to respond effectively. Reporting mechanisms are either inaccessible or biased, and platform moderation tools frequently misidentify threats or silence survivors. Ruha Benjamin's (2019) argument that technologies can function as instruments of "engineered inequity" is reflected in these failures. Marginalized women such as Dalit activists, Muslim public figures, and queer individuals are disproportionately targeted, yet often find no redress either from platforms or the state.

3. Aadhaar and Biometric Exclusion

India's Aadhaar biometric identity system, although intended to enable access to welfare and digital services, has also become a site of datafied exclusion. Studies by Reetika Khera (2019) and civil society audits reveal:

Women, elderly, and disabled individuals are more likely to face authentication failures due to mismatched biometric data.

In rural and tribal areas, biometric mismatches have led to denial of food rations, pensions, and health services.

Many women are digitally invisible due to incorrect or incomplete data entry, often tied to patriarchal norms that undervalue their identities.

These instances illustrate how technological infrastructures become gatekeepers of rights, replicating casteist, gendered, and regional inequalities under the guise of efficiency.

4. Platform Design and Algorithmic Bias

Beyond infrastructure and ID systems, platform architectures themselves are exclusionary. Search algorithms, content moderation systems, and ad targeting practices often reflect gender, caste, and religious biases embedded in the data they are trained on. As Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) notes, these systems mirror and amplify dominant social ideologies, marginalizing non-normative identities and narratives.

For example:

1. Dalit women journalists and activists face online abuse that is often not flagged by moderation systems.
2. AI-based hiring and facial recognition tools have shown lower accuracy for darker skinned and female faces, as demonstrated by global studies and pilot programs in India.

Despite this, India lacks a comprehensive AI ethics policy grounded in gender justice. Existing digital policies, such as the National Digital Communications Policy (2018) and Draft India Data Governance Framework (2022), remain technocratic, with little attention to intersectional harms.

5. Regional and Rural Digital Exclusions

The urban-rural divide in digital access continues to undermine SDG 5 goals. Women in rural India are not only less likely to own digital devices but are often dependent on male relatives to access online services. Structural challenges include:

1. Low electricity reliability, limited telecom infrastructure.
2. Lack of localized content and interfaces in regional languages.
3. Poor digital training ecosystems, particularly for older or non-school-going women.

Despite efforts under initiatives like PMGDISHA (Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan), most training programs are short-term, underfunded, and not gender-sensitive in design or delivery.

This empirical mapping demonstrates that digital inequalities in India are not simply technical deficits, but are deeply entangled with social hierarchies, design politics, and systemic neglect. The state's push for digital inclusion, unless reframed through an intersectional feminist lens, risks reinforcing the very exclusions it seeks to address.

As Couldry and Mejias (2019) warn, “data colonialism” is not about access alone, but about who controls the terms of engagement in datafied societies. Similarly, as Naila Kabeer (2005) insists, empowerment must move beyond access to encompass agency, autonomy, and institutional transformation. The next section explores how these insights must reshape our understanding of SDG 5 not as a developmental checklist, but as a transformative framework for gendered digital justice.

V. SDG 5 and Feminist Digital Policy: Gaps, Challenges, and Transformative Possibilities

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” While digital technologies are frequently celebrated as accelerators of this goal, the integration of SDG 5 into India’s digital policy landscape remains partial, fragmented, and largely instrumentalist. Rather than being guided by feminist values of equity, care, and justice, current policies often focus on technocratic access and efficiency-driven governance, failing to account for the lived realities of women’s digital experiences particularly those at the margins.

1. Policy Gaps and Gender-Blind Frameworks

A review of India’s major digital policies such as the Digital India Programme (2015), the National Digital Communications Policy (2018), and the Draft India Data Governance Framework (2022) reveals a notable absence of gender-disaggregated planning. These frameworks prioritize infrastructure, broadband expansion, and digital governance but rarely engage with the digital gender divide or technology-facilitated gender-based violence in any substantive way.

Even flagship digital literacy schemes such as:

1. PMGDISHA (Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan),
2. National Digital Literacy Mission, or
3. BharatNet

focus more on connectivity and technical training than on transformative empowerment. These programs often:

1. Lack gender-sensitive curricula,
2. Ignore the specific challenges of women with caregiving responsibilities or low digital confidence,
3. Are rolled out without consultation with women’s rights organizations or feminist tech experts.
4. As a result, digital policy in India continues to be gender-blind, if not actively exclusionary.

2. Global Benchmarks and Missed Opportunities

India’s digital strategy stands in contrast to emerging global standards for inclusive AI and digital ethics:

1. UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) calls for non-discrimination, gender equality, and inclusion as foundational principles.
2. The OECD AI Principles (2019) and the EU's Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025) emphasize intersectionality, rights-based frameworks, and diversity in AI development.
3. The Feminist Principles of the Internet (APC, 2016) and the Feminist AI Research Network advocate for decolonial, anti-patriarchal, and community-driven design of digital infrastructures.

India's failure to align with these standards is not just a normative lapse it represents a missed opportunity to lead in building feminist digital futures that are accountable to its most marginalized citizens.

3. The Need for Gender-Transformative Digital Governance

Integrating SDG 5 into digital policy requires moving from tokenistic inclusion to gender transformative governance. This entails:

1. Intersectional Gender Audits of all digital programs and platforms (drawing from Fraser's parity of participation framework).
2. Mandatory gender-disaggregated data collection on access, usage, and digital harms, with attention to caste, religion, region, and disability.
3. Safe, accessible, and survivor-centric redressal mechanisms for online violence and digital exclusion.
4. Institutionalization of gender digital impact assessments in the design and rollout of AI, biometric ID systems, and smart governance tools.
5. Participation of women and gender-diverse individuals in policy development, technological design, and oversight bodies.

Crucially, these reforms must be grounded in relational accountability and ethical care, as articulated by Joan Tronto (1993), and be driven by participatory governance frameworks that enable communities not corporations or state technocrats to shape the digital future.

4. A Feminist Reimagining of SDG 5 in the Digital Era

A feminist articulation of SDG 5 in India must go beyond inclusion-as-access. It must be rooted in:

1. **Agency:** Women must not only consume technology but create, govern, and shape it.
2. **Autonomy:** Digital tools should expand freedom, not deepen surveillance.
3. **Safety:** Cyberspace must be protected as a domain of dignity and freedom from harm.
4. **Justice:** Policy must address not only individual grievances but systemic inequalities and historical exclusions.

Drawing on Naila Kabear's (2005) work on women's empowerment and Bina Agarwal's (2010) scholarship on participatory governance, this vision recognizes that rights are not delivered by design they must be claimed through collective struggle and structural change.

If SDG 5 is to be more than aspirational, it must be embedded into the core logic of digital governance not as an afterthought, but as a guiding principle. This requires institutional will, feminist vision, and structural transformation. India stands at a crossroads: it can either continue down the path of technocratic development or embrace a feminist digital ethic that truly empowers its women and marginalized citizens. As this paper has argued, the digital future must not be built on datafied harm, but on justice, care, and collective accountability.

VII. Conclusion: Toward a Feminist Digital Future Rooted in Justice and Care

As India advances along its digital development trajectory, the urgency to interrogate who is included, who is excluded, and how power operates within datafied infrastructures becomes ever more pressing. This paper has argued that while digital technologies hold the potential to advance Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) gender equality and empowerment—such potential will remain unrealized without a structural and feminist rethinking of digital inclusion.

The analysis reveals that digital inclusion in its current form is deeply insufficient, often reduced to metrics of device ownership or internet connectivity. Such reductive framings obscure the everyday realities of exclusion, harm, and control faced by women and gender diverse individuals—especially those from Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, queer, and rural communities. Drawing on interdisciplinary feminist theory and empirical evidence, this study demonstrates that gendered harms in the digital age are not peripheral or accidental; they are systemic outcomes of infrastructures shaped by bias, surveillance, and technocratic governance.

From algorithmic discrimination and online violence to biometric exclusions and labor invisibility, digital systems in India are not just delivering services they are producing new hierarchies of access, dignity, and visibility. At the same time, state responses remain limited, reactive, and technocratic, often privileging efficiency over equity. Platforms continue to operate without meaningful accountability, and digital policies frequently overlook the complex ways in which gender intersects with caste, class, ability, region, and religion.

To reclaim the transformative promise of SDG 5, we must move beyond the notion of inclusion as integration and embrace inclusion as transformation. This means: Embedding feminist ethics of care and accountability into digital design and governance. Ensuring intersectional participation in technology policymaking and evaluation. Prioritizing safety, dignity, autonomy, and epistemic justice as non-negotiable components of any digital future.

A feminist vision of digital justice calls for reparative, participatory, and community-rooted infrastructures ones that listen, adapt, and respond to the knowledge, needs, and aspirations of those historically excluded.

As Naila Kabeer (2005) reminds us, empowerment is not just about access to resources, but the ability to exercise choice and agency in an enabling institutional environment. Similarly, Nancy Fraser's (2008) call for participatory parity demands a restructuring of social and technological systems to allow all individuals to be co-creators of the world they inhabit.

Ultimately, digital justice cannot be realized through technical tweaks or top-down reforms. It must emerge from a collective political and ethical project one that is deeply feminist, radically inclusive, and relentlessly just. As we build the future, the question must no longer be "how to include women in digital society?" but rather, "how digital society can be restructured to center the lives, needs, and dignity of those at its margins?"

Only then can SDG 5 move from paper to practice not as a goal to be ticked off, but as a living, evolving commitment to a more just digital world.

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