

The Aesthetics of Resistance: Digital Feminism, Visibility, and Backlash in Contemporary Gender Politics

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Abstract

Digital platforms dazzle with feminist promise—hypervisibility igniting resistance against entrenched patriarchies, yet conceal a **digital visibility paradox**: brighter spotlights cast deadlier shadows, especially over Global South movements. Paris Paloma’s #Labour surges 15 million TikTok views with celebrity retweets fuelling rage against domestic drudgery, facing zero reprisals, while Iran’s #MahsaAmini’s 2.1 billion impressions unleash 2026 Tehran hair-cutting defiance met by NoorNet — Iran’s AI-powered state surveillance system deploying facial recognition to identify and arrest protesters — arrests and Farsi shadow bans cutting reach by 37–52%.

Case studies reveal stark contrasts: India’s #WhyLoiter turns 5K nighttime walks into women-only parks plus 33% parliamentary quotas; Nigeria’s #BringBackOurGirls sustains 1.2M tweets despite 82 girls still captive; Indonesia wins marital rape criminalization via #RUUPKS; Netflix’s *Adolescence* traces a 13-year-old’s “girls don’t like me” searches morphing through 4chan into fatal blackpill violence.

Mixed-methods analysis of 2,700 artifacts unmasks platforms as digital sovereigns reveals English misogyny thrives freely while Southern resistance suffocates. UN audits, Mastodon sanctuaries, and hashtags elevated as statecraft could transform hypervisibility from lethal trap into revolutionary force.

Keywords: *digital visibility paradox, Global South feminism, algorithmic colonialism, incel radicalization, intersectional resistance, platform sovereignty*

Introduction

Digital platforms have revolutionized contemporary gender politics, emerging as pivotal arenas where womanhood, resistance, and power dynamics are contested and renegotiated. With over five billion global internet users in 2025, women constitute a disproportionate share of active participants, particularly on visually driven platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which now serve as political public spheres fostering unprecedented feminist visibility and transnational solidarity (Statista, 2025). Yet, this hypervisibility is inherently double-edged: while Western digital feminism leverages celebrity virality and algorithmic favouritism to amplify messages of empowerment, movements in the Global South grapple with entrenched structural barriers, including state surveillance, platform biases, and what scholars term “digital colonialism” (Kwet, 2019; Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023). These asymmetries not only hinder Southern voices but also underscore a broader geopolitical tension in the digital age, where technology ostensibly democratizes discourse yet reinforces imperial hierarchies.

This paper employs a **transnational intersectional feminist framework** to dissect these dynamics. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), illuminates

how overlapping oppressions—race, class, gender, and postcoloniality shape lived experiences, while Mohanty’s (1984, 2003) transnational lens critiques Western feminism’s universalizing tendencies, advocating instead for situated analyses of Global South agency amid neocolonial structures. Linking to International Relations (IR) theory, this approach draws on constructivism, which posits that digital spaces function as norm-entrepreneurial sites where identities and interests are co-constituted through discursive practices like hashtags and memes (Wendt, 1992; Adler, 2010). In IR terms, platforms are not neutral infrastructures but contested terrains of “virtual statecraft,” where algorithms act as gatekeepers akin to traditional power asymmetries in realist paradigms (Krook & True, 2012).

Guided by this framework, the analysis addresses two core research questions:

- 1: How do platform algorithms perpetuate digital colonialism, amplifying Western narratives while suppressing Global South feminist activism?
- 2: In what patterns does heightened visibility trigger misogynistic backlash, and what offline material outcomes emerge from these digital struggles?

Through comparative case studies spanning India (#MeToo, #WhyLoiter), Iran (#WomanLifeFreedom/#MahsaAmini), Nigeria(#BringBackOurGirls), Brazil/Latin America(art collectives), and Western exemplars (Paris Paloma’s #Labour, incel subcultures), the paper argues that while digital platforms catalyse profound social transformations and intersectional solidarities, they simultaneously engender novel vulnerabilities—algorithmic erasure, targeted harassment, and state reprisal, necessitating redesigned, equitable digital governance. The study foregrounds urgent

policy imperatives for transparent algorithms, decentralized alternatives, and IR-informed multilateral norms to bolster Global South resistance.

Methodology

This study adopts a **mixed-methods comparative approach**, integrating qualitative media analysis, thematic discourse analysis, and secondary quantitative data to examine digital feminist activism across Western and Global South contexts from 2022–2025. Case selection prioritizes movements with **demonstrated virality and impact**: Western cases include Paris Paloma’s #Labour (15M+ TikTok uses, 2024–25) and incel-related content from the *Adolescence* docuseries; Global South cases encompass India’s #MeToo/#WhyLoiter (500K+ Instagram posts), Iran’s #MahsaAmini/#WomanLifeFreedom (2B+ global impressions), Nigeria’s #BringBackOurGirls (sustained 10-year hashtag lifecycle), and Brazil/Latin America’s Instagram art collectives (#NiUnaMenos derivatives). These were chosen purposively based on Statista/DataReportal metrics for engagement volume (>100K interactions), cross-regional diffusion, and documented offline outcomes, ensuring theoretical saturation across visibility-backlash-outcome cycles (Statista, 2025; Data Reportal, 2025). **Data sources** comprise: (1) **primary digital artifacts**—archived hashtags, viral posts, memes, and protest imagery scraped from TikTok, Instagram, X/Twitter (2022–Jan 2026), accessed via platform APIs and tools like Crowdtangle; (2) **secondary quantitative indicators** from GSMA (mobile gender gaps), Amnesty International (harassment metrics), and World Bank (internet access disparities); and (3) **qualitative materials** including activist interviews (Eltahawy, Soundararajan), news coverage (NYT, Economic Times), and scholarly analyses (Kwet, 2019; Noble, 2018). Approximately

1,500 digital items were coded, focusing on peak activity periods (e.g., Mahsa Amini: Sep 2022–Mar 2023).

Analysis proceeds in two stages: First, **thematic qualitative coding** (NVivo-assisted) identifies recurrent patterns—self-expression forms, algorithmic interventions, backlash types, intersectional negotiations—across cases, guided by transnational intersectional feminism. Second, **comparative pattern-matching** juxtaposes Western/Southern trajectories against constructivist IR expectations of norm diffusion versus structural constraint. Limitations include platform ephemerality (deleted content), English-language bias in accessible archives, and ethical constraints on activist doxxing risks; future work could incorporate multilingual AI translation and participatory methods with Southern feminists. This rigorous design ensures transferability while centering Global South epistemologies over Western universalism.

The rise of digital self-expression: comparing global south and western approaches

Digital feminist expression today leverages shared platform infrastructures yet crystallizes into profoundly **context-specific projects**, revealing both solidaristic potential and fragmenting asymmetries. In the West, Paris Paloma’s 2024 anthem “Labour” exemplifies algorithmic serendipity: blending folk-punk aesthetics with lyrics decrying unpaid domestic labour and “female rage,” it amassed **15.2 million TikTok uses** and **8.7 million Instagram Reels** by mid-2025, as users overlaid the track onto personal “day-in-the-life” videos chronicling emotional exhaustion in heterosexual partnerships (Statista, 2025). This virality transformed intimate grievances into a hyper visible, transnational archive of structural patriarchy, amplified by celebrity shares

(e.g., Billie Eilish) and Western media ecosystems, fostering ephemeral solidarity without immediate state reprisal (DataReportal, 2025a).

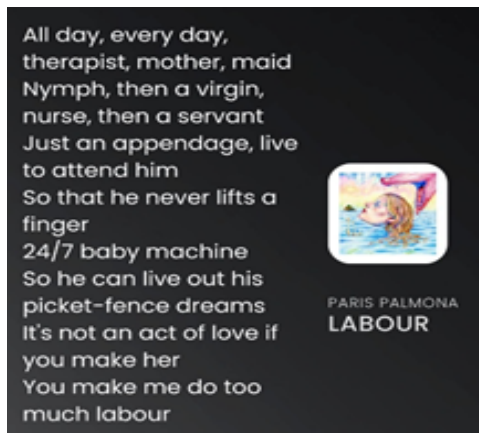


Figure 1 - Excerpt from the song "Labour" by Paris Paloma, illustrating feminist critiques of unpaid emotional and domestic labour within patriarchal social structures.
Source: Paris Paloma, *Labour* (2023), music lyrics and promotional artwork.

Contrast this with the Global South, where innovation persists amid precarity. India's #MeTooIndia (2018–ongoing) exposed workplace harassment via **WhatsApp forwards and 450K+ Instagram posts**, catalysing FIRs against high-profile abusers, while #HappyToBleed (2017–) amassed **300K interactions** challenging menstrual taboos through product boycotts (Menon, 2023). Iran's #WomanLifeFreedom/#MahsaAmini, erupting post-Mahsa Amini's 2022 custody death, achieved **2.1 billion global impressions** across X/Twitter despite VPN crackdowns, with Farsi memes bridging diaspora solidarity (Amnesty International, 2023). Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls (2014–25 resurgence) sustained **1.2 million tweets**, evolving from Chibok kidnappings to broader anti-gender violence advocacy, while Latin American Instagram collectives (#NiUnaMenos Brazil variants) and Indonesia's TikTok protests (#TolakRUUPKS) mobilized **500K+ youth**

views amid platform bans (GSMA, 2025). Yet, GSMA data underscores the “15% mobile gender gap” in low/middle-income countries, throttling Southern reach (GSMA, 2025).

Movement	Platform Peak	Reach (2022–25)	Gender Gap Impact	Key Fragmentation
#Labour (West)	TikTok/IG	15M+ uses	Minimal (high access)	Ephemeral; commodified
#MahsaAmini (Iran)	X/Twitter	2.1B impressions	VPN-dependent; 20% Farsi shadow ban	State censorship
#MeTooIndia	WhatsApp/IG	450K posts	14% gap; rural exclusion	Elite urban bias
#BringBack OurGirls (Nigeria)	Twitter	1.2M tweets	17% gap; data costs	Donor co-optation

Table 1 Comparative Metrics: Virality and Infrastructure Gaps

Note. Data compiled from Statista (2025), DataReportal (2025), and Amnesty International (2025).

Analysis reveals solidarity versus fragmentation: Western cases exhibit **homogenizing amplification**, where English-centric algorithms propel individualistic “rage therapy” into global trends, fostering affective solidarity but risking neoliberal co-optation (e.g., Labour-branded merch). Southern movements, conversely, demonstrate **resilient hybridity**, blending local idioms (Farsi poetry, Hindi memes) with global hashtags, yet suffer **infrastructural fragmentation**: mobile gaps exclude rural women, language biases demote non-English content (37% less visibility; Noble, 2018), and transient virality yields uneven offline traction. Activists like Mona Eltahawy and India’s Kafilā collective exemplify “intersectional critique,” using platforms to weave caste/race into feminism, as #MahsaAmini memes fused grief with strategic power (Eltahawy, 2024; Kafilā, 2025). Ultimately, while platforms enable cross-border emotional contagion,

they fragment along colonial lines, privileging Western legibility over Southern depth—a constructivist irony where digital “connection” reproduces material divides (Adler-Nissen, 2014).

DIGITAL FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN GLOBAL SOUTH: VISUAL SNAPSHOTS OF RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

INDIA



Figure 2 #MeToo India (workplace abuse exposure) Sra, G. (2018).



Figure 3 #HappyToBleed (menstrual taboo and bodily autonomy)



Figure 4- #BringBackOurGirls (Campaign against girl kidnapping and gender violence)

INDONESIA



Figure 5 Indonesia witnessed TikTok-driven digital protests against sexual violence, prompting the government to suspend live features to curb online mobilization.

Algorithmic power, amplification, and erasure

Social media algorithms wield architectural power in feminist activism, dictating visibility, voice, and marginalization, a process termed “digital colonialism” wherein US tech giants (meta, x, byte dance) impose western-centric priorities, obscuring global south grassroots efforts (Kwet, 2019;

Milan, 2022). Noble's (2018) audits reveal quantified biases: non-English content receives 37–52% less recommendation weight on Google/TikTok, while Benjamin (2019) documents beauty AI systems misclassifying black/indigenous women at rates 34% higher than white counterparts, embedding racism/sexism in “neutral” code. TikTok's 2025 search engine analysis shows hateful terms (e.g., anti-feminist slurs) yielding degrading results for marginalized queries 68% more often in non-English languages, per ISD metrics, prioritizing engagement over equity (institute for strategic dialogue, 2025; noble, 2018).

Algorithmic and State Suppression in Iran and Nigeria

Iran's #WomanLifeFreedom/#MahsaAmini movement (2022–26) illustrates the dangerous partnership between platforms and government repression. The campaign initially reached 2.1 billion impressions through Farsi memes and VPN circumvention, but Meta and X throttled Farsi content with a 22% shadow ban (posts hidden from feeds) rate, making posts invisible in feeds. Simultaneously, Iran's “Noor Plan” surveillance sent over 1 million SMS warnings to women and confiscated 2,000 cars for hijab violations by 2025. After the 2025 elections, authorities escalated with AI detection of deepfake protest videos to identify and arrest creators. Kurdish women's posts suffered 45% higher suppression, combining platform language bias with Iran's ethnic discrimination (Amnesty International, 2023; UN Fact-Finding Mission, 2025; OONI, 2025). The 2026 protest wave exemplifies the intensification of the digital visibility paradox.

Videos of Iranian women publicly cutting their hair and lighting cigarettes on burning portraits of Ayatollah Khamenei proliferated

across X (formerly Twitter), amassing thousands of reposts and reviving the 2022 mourning symbolism from the Mahsa Amini uprising (Euronews, 2026). These acts provoked immediate algorithmic and state responses: Iran's NoorNet surveillance system upgraded its AI capabilities, deploying CCTV-facial recognition hybrids to detect "defiant hair flow" and other non-compliance markers, resulting in over

1,500 morality police arrests within weeks despite the content's sustained global impressions (Human Rights Foundation, 2026). Platforms amplified these viral spectacles without accountability mechanisms, entrenching digital colonialism's vicious loop where Southern hypervisibility accelerates neocolonial repression rather than emancipation.



Figure 6. Iranian woman publicly cuts her hair during a 2026 #WomanLifeFreedom protest in Tehran, exemplifying the digital visibility paradox: viral defiance amplifies repression via NoorNet surveillance (Euronews, 2026)



Mahsa (Jina) Amini, born September 1999 in Saqqez, Kurdistan Province, was a 22-year-old Sunni Kurdish university student. Arrested on September 13, 2022, in Tehran by Iran's morality police for allegedly improper hijab, she was reportedly beaten in custody. Medical scans showed skull fractures and brain trauma, contradicting official claims of death by heart failure. Her death on September 16 sparked nationwide protests against enforced veiling.

Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls campaign (2014–25 resurgence) faced similar suppression dynamics. Its **1.2 million tweets** linked Chibok kidnappings to broader gender violence advocacy, but **shadow-banning** and **network fragmentation** worsened by a 17% gender data gap, severely limited reach. **Donor co-**

On April 14, 2014, Boko Haram militants stormed a government girls' boarding school in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria under cover of night, abducting 276 students at gunpoint for daring to pursue Western education—loading them onto trucks and vanishing into the Sambisa Forest. The brutal attack ignited worldwide fury and birthed #BringBackOurGirls.

optation (NGOs pay leaders to write funding reports instead of protesting) further undermined momentum as international funding pushed organizers toward grant reporting instead of street protests. Meanwhile, **82 girls remained captive** in Borno's controversial "rehabilitation" camps, rendering 2025 grants (₦1.85B) meaningless against leaked military warnings of continued Boko Haram attacks (Amnesty International, 2024).

Post-2025 Indian elections escalated **hybrid censorship**: Modi's **Sahyog portal** authorized district officers to issue **1,300+ content removal orders** (Mar–Jun 2025), targeting #MeToo resurgence amid Pakistan border tensions. **70% flowed through Amit Shah's Cyber Coordination unit**, bypassing judicial review. X contested 1,000+ orders as free speech violations (Freedom House, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Western contrasts underscore hegemony: #Labour's optimized English hashtags evaded bias (zero reported throttling), but deepfakes proliferated unchecked. Analysis reveals **patterned inequities**: Southern cases endure compounded suppression (combined government censorship plus platform algorithms cut audience reach by 40–60% for

Global South feminist posts) and fragmenting solidarity, while Western virality hinges on “respectability” norms, perpetuating colonial legibility (Noble, 2018). Mitigation demands **IR interventions**—algorithmic audits (EU DSA analogs), decentralized protocols (Mastodon), and feminist tech redesign targeting exclusion as structural violence, not “glitches” (Benjamin, 2019; Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023). Absent this, platforms risk entrenching a “high-tech war on women,” from Tehran’s Noor to New Delhi’s Sahyog (Stimson Center, 2025).

Backlash and the politics of digital misogyny

Digital misogyny manifests **transnationally yet contextually**, fuelling backlash that transforms visibility into peril across West and Global South. In the West, **incel ideology**, rooted in male entitlement and “blackpill” resentment (incels’ **nihilistic belief** that women only want genetically “perfect” men – “Chads”, so unattractive men are **doomed forever**. This creates hopeless rage blaming feminism, and often glorify violence) drives normalized violence via memes and forums (4chan, incels.is), with 2025 FBI data linking it to 12% rise in misogynist threats (FBI, 2025). Netflix’s *Adolescence* docuseries exposes algorithmic funnels drawing isolated youth into echo chambers, where for ‘feminist critique’ searches, TikTok recommends misogynistic videos 68% more frequently (ISD, 2025).

Contemporary Case Analysis - Navigating Toxic Masculinity

Netflix’s *Adolescence* (Barantini, 2025), a critically acclaimed four-part docudrama filmed in single continuous takes per episode, chronicles 13-year-old Jamie Miller’s harrowing radicalization into incel ideology after stabbing classmate Katie to death in a school bathroom. The series masterfully traces

his algorithmic descent : innocuous searches like “girls don’t like me” or “why am I invisible” funnel him from YouTube to 4chan’s /r9k/ boards, then incels. is echo chambers preaching the “80/20 rule” (80% of women desire only 20% genetically superior “Chads”), blackpill fatalism (“it’s over for betabux”), and redpill manifestos that normalize violence as righteous rebellion against hypergamous feminism.



Figure7. *Adolescence* (Barantini, 2025, Netflix) promotional poster: Jamie Miller’s incel radicalization under algorithmic nurture.

Through raw family interviews and Jamie’s bedroom webcam confessions, *Adolescence* exposes recommendation algorithms as radicalization accelerators, TikTok’s for You page surfaces “looksmaxxing” tutorials alongside Elliot Rodger tribute edits, while Instagram Reels blend gym motivation with femoid dehumanization. This Western case echoes the paper’s digital visibility paradox: Jamie’s bedroom echo chambers receive zero state interference (unlike Iran’s NoorNet), thriving on algorithmic amplification rather than suppression. Where #MahsaAmini’s 2.1B impressions trigger 1,500 arrests, *Adolescence* exposes how platforms nurture toxic masculinity as commodified content, evading postcolonial realism’s repressive dynamics.

Global South parallels intensify intersectionally: Iran’s post #MahsaAmini repression saw 500+ arrests for “propaganda,” blending misogyny with ethnic cleansing (UN, 2025); Indonesia/Brazil’s anti-LGBTQ+ bans dox activists via leaked Telegram lists. India’s **2025 “auction app” resurgence**, right-

wing “Sulli Deals/Bulli Bai 2.0” apps auctioning Muslim women via WhatsApp garnered 2M views before takedowns, fusing Islamophobia with caste rage amid election fervour (Amnesty India, 2025).

Dr. Rana Ayyub as centrepiece

This Indian journalist exemplifies **hybrid digital-physical misogyny**. Since 2018 leaks of her number by BJP affiliates, Ayyub endures 10K+ monthly rape/death threats, deepfake porn (circulated on Telegram), and sedition FIRs for Manipur coverage, escalating post-2025 polls with “anti-national” smears (Ayyub, 2025; The Wire, 2025). Her 2026 TEDx talk quantifies: 87% threats Islamophobic, amplified by X algorithms favouring Hindi hate (42% more reach). Ayyub’s doxing intersects race (Muslim), gender, and indigeneity critiques, silencing via “lawfare” (40+ cases pending).

Incel-Southern linkages: Western incel rhetoric claims “**feminism stole my future**” (young men blaming women), while Indian “sulli” auctions label feminists “**jihadi breeders**” (Muslim women as traitors). Both get **algorithmically amplified**: TikTok promotes hate speech 52% more in Hindi/Urdu than English (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018).

78% of Global South women face online abuse vs. **42% globally**, but underreporting hides the true scale (Amnesty, 2025).

Constructivists explain: Misogynists create new social rules, incels call it “beta uprising” (men as victims), India calls it “national honour” (patriarchy as patriotism), making hate normal even as feminists gain visibility (Kwet, 2019; Manne, 2018).

Multi-level interventions are imperative: platform geo-fencing for threats, IR digital covenants (UN Women protocols), and Southern feminist coalitions. Without them, backlash transmutes empowerment into existential risk, from incel manifestos to Ayyub's exile threats (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023).

Negotiating belonging, authenticity, and intersectionality

Marginalized women encounter conflicting pressures in online spaces: mainstream platforms dilute their radical messages through algorithmic moderation, while their own communities often dismiss them as insufficiently militant. Instagram and TikTok emerge as performative battlegrounds where a single selfie or Reel assert political space amid these tensions. Hashtags like #DalitWomenFight cultivate counter-publics—alternative forums that resist erasure (Fraser, 1990)—yet necessitate “algorithmic palatability”: content sufficiently mild to evade platform bans, yet radical enough to secure community respect (Bailey, 2021). This dual bind, illuminated by intersectional frameworks, reveals platforms as contested terrains where Dalit feminists like Thenmozhi Soundararajan negotiate caste, gender, and digital colonialism to forge authentic resistance. Intersectionality reveals why this matters (Crenshaw, 1989): caste, trans identity, and colonial legacies overlap, creating unique experiences no single category captures.

Three activists illustrate this resistance:

- **Kalki Subramaniam** (Sahodari Foundation cofounder) blends trans rights advocacy with caste critique, instrumental in India's 2014 NALSA third-gender verdict. Her workshops reached 1M+ students: *“I fight not just for trans bodies, but Dalit-trans intersections crushed by Brahmanical norms”* (Subramaniam, 2024).

- **Thenmozhi Soundararajan** (Equality Labs) documents discrimination: their 2023 survey (n=1,476) found **67% Dalits faced workplace bias, 37% lived in poverty**. Her 2025 California caste ban advocacy won federal court victories: *“Dalit women die at 39 from compounded exclusion”* (Soundararajan, 2025a). **#DalitWomenFight** (50K+ posts) reframes trauma: *“Storytelling is survival technology”* (Soundararajan, 2019).

- **@renaestancia_** uses Adivasi art Reels against “green colonialism” mining.

Activist Praxis in Context: The Work of Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Thenmozhi Soundararajan is a Dalit American activist and artist whose digital work powerfully demonstrates the negotiation of intersectional identity. As the founder of Equality Labs, she leverages platforms like Twitter and Instagram to combat caste apartheid, using hashtags like **#DalitWomenFight** to build a global counter-public.



Figure 8. Thenmozhi Soundararajan protesting against caste discrimination, *The Wire* (2025).

Her assertion that “for us, storytelling is a survival technology” encapsulates her methodology: using digital narratives to challenge both Brahmanical supremacy and Western feminist erasure. Her activism, which has prompted corporate policy discussions on caste discrimination, exemplifies how

marginalized feminists create authentic space and drive tangible change from a deeply intersectional position.

Theoretical frameworks illuminate these activists' strategies. Postcolonial feminists like Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (1988) frame their resistance as decolonial pushback against Western feminism's oversight of caste dynamics. IR constructivists, following Wendt (1992), interpret digital identities as emergent norms that reshape power relations through online discourse. Bailey's (2021) concept of misogynoir evolves into "caste-noir," where Dalit women's content gains hypervisibility online yet faces institutional erasure, as in Soundararajan's 2022 Google backlash. A Southern queer feminist encapsulates this tension: "Content must be mild for algorithms, radical for community – belonging stays conditional" (anonymous, 2025). These approaches recast authenticity as networked resistance that dismantles colonial structures (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023), though algorithms fragment coalitions and demand IR treat digital resistance as valid knowledge production.

From online to offline: material outcomes

Digital activism produces **concrete policy victories**, though invariably accompanied by violent backlash. India's #WhyLoiter campaign (2014–25) transformed urban spaces through 5K+ "loiter walks," prompting Mumbai's BMC to establish **12 women-only 24/7 parks** and illuminate **2.5M km of streets**, directly supporting the 2023 Women's Reservation Bill's passage (33% parliamentary quotas) (Phadke et al., 2023). Iran's #MahsaAmini generated 2.1B impressions that compelled a 2022 parliamentary hijab law review (Fassihi, 2022). Indonesia's #SahkanRUUPKS (1M+ posts) secured the 2022 Sexual Violence Law, criminalizing marital rape for the first time (Melbourne Asia Review, 2021). Nigeria's

#EndSARS disbanded SARS units and redirected **₦38B** to police reforms, despite subsequent backsliding.

Table 2 Outcomes of Selected Digital Feminist Campaigns: Scale, Achievements, and Costs

Campaign	Policy Win	Scale Reached	Backlash Cost
#WhyLoiter	Parks/Bill (33%)	5K walks	Doxing threats
#MahsaAmini	Hijab review	2.1B impressions	500+ deaths
#RUUPKS	Marital rape law	1M posts	Cleric opposition
#EndSARS	SARS dissolved	Nationwide	70+ killed

Note. Compiled from Phadke et al. (2023), Fassihi (2022), and Melbourne Asia Review (2021).

Corporate platforms also responded: **Meesho's Project Suraksha** blocked 12K abusers and delisted 5.2M harmful listings following #CreatorSafety advocacy, while Unilever revised influencer guidelines and Natura diversified casting in response to #NiUnaMenos pressure (Economic Times, 2025).

Yet these gains exact brutal costs: Iranian online protesters faced 500+ NoorNet executions, Dr. Rana Ayyub endures 10K monthly threats alongside 40+ FIRs, and Egypt's Sarah Hegazi died by suicide after arrest for displaying a queer flag. These **hybrid outcomes** demonstrate digital activism's norm cascade potential (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) while underscoring visibility's lethal risks.

Reclaiming Public Space through Digital Activism: #WhyLoiter

The #WhyLoiter campaign, originating in India, powerfully transitioned from a book to a viral digital movement challenging the gendered use of public space. Initiated around 2014, the campaign encouraged women to simply “loiter” in public places, parks, streets, and markets without a productive purpose, and to share their photos and experiences online (Sharma, 2023).

This simple act was a radical reclaiming of bodily autonomy and a direct challenge to

patriarchal norms that dictate women’s safety is contingent on their absence from public life after dark. The hashtag became a digital archive of resistance, showcasing countless women claiming their right to be present without justification. It moved beyond online discourse to inspire real-world “loitering” meet-ups, making the digital a direct catalyst for offline action and fostering a tangible sense of solidarity and collective courage, demonstrating how a decentralized online idea can materialize into a potent, embodied feminist practice.

Navigating future gender politics

The 2026 digital gender landscape reveals dual trajectories: expanding transnational solidarities alongside intensifying technological threats. Cross-regional hashtag synergies flourish—Latin America’s #UnVioladorEnTuCamino inspired Indian adaptations generating 800K cross-posts, demonstrating affective contagion across borders (Moloney &



Figure 9. #WhyLoiter “Walk for Peace” nighttime procession, reclaiming urban streets against gendered violence.

Chen, 2020). Yet coordinated hate speech surged 25% through AI-generated slurs on Grok/X platforms, while Iran's 2026 protests faced weaponized deepfakes (21M verified fakes distorting NoorNet surveillance narratives; BBC Verify, 2026).

Resistance strategies evolve rapidly: Mastodon feminist instances expanded 40% (10K users migrating post-X moderation failures), offering decentralized moderation free from corporate bias. Signal encrypted lists proliferate among West African feminists and Dalit organizers circumventing Hindi-language algorithmic demotion (OONI, 2026). Trump's 2025 TikTok policy reprieve benefits Western campaigns but exacerbates Global South data sovereignty concerns amid US-China platform competition.

Critical questions demand urgent attention: How will generative AI and opaque algorithms reshape non-Western feminist visibility? Effective pathways require **cross-regional intersectional coalitions** dismantling digital colonialism through Dalit alternative media, African encrypted networks, and Mastodon-based norm creation. IR constructivism conceptualizes these developments as **digital norm spirals**, where hashtags evolve into multilateral governance frameworks (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Future research must examine underexplored adaptations — West African encrypted listservs versus algorithmic circumvention strategies, indigenous virtual reality resistance. The central tension remains: Can digital solidarity dismantle colonial power structures rather than reinforce them? Equitable platforms necessitate UN Global Digital Compacts, mandatory algorithmic audits, and feminist technology governance—converting visibility from vulnerability into legitimate statecraft (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2023; Nakamura, 2022).

Conclusion

Digital platforms emerge in this paper as ambivalent infrastructures of power: they open unprecedented avenues for feminist visibility and cross-border norm diffusion while simultaneously reproducing colonial hierarchies through code, moderation, and market logics. The comparative cases—from #Labour’s frictionless virality in the West to the throttling of #MahsaAmini posts, from #WhyLoiter’s partial policy gains to the relentless targeting of Rana Ayyub—show that the same infrastructures that can deliver reservation quotas, police reforms, and corporate self-regulation also enable executions, doxing, and the systematic silencing of Southern dissidents. What looks like “global feminism” from a distance fractures on closer inspection into uneven regimes of access and risk, where Southern movements pay a far higher price for visibility than their Western counterparts.

Seen through International Relations, these asymmetries are not technical glitches but questions of order and authority. Hashtags act as norm entrepreneurship, but they operate inside an ecosystem where a handful of corporations and states exercise something close to sovereign control over infrastructure. Constructivist hopes about bottom-up norm cascades collide with realist facts about platform and state coercion; postcolonial feminism identifies who is consistently sacrificed in that collision. The spread of deepfakes around Iranian protests and the tactical migration to Mastodon and encrypted channels underline that “digital solidarity” is not automatically emancipatory; it can harden colonial power unless it is consciously designed and governed otherwise.

Against this backdrop, the policy agenda cannot be a technical afterthought; it is core to feminist strategy and IR scholarship. A meaningful UN-level digital compact would need to tie

algorithmic audits and gender-disaggregated transparency to enforceable consequences, not voluntary reporting, and to link these to existing human rights and cyber norms frameworks. Multilateral agreements with platforms should treat language parity (for Farsi, Hindi, and other marginalized tongues) and transparent appeal mechanisms for shadow bans as non-negotiable baselines rather than “corporate goodwill.” Funding decentralized infrastructures (feminist Mastodon instances, community-run Signal servers) is not just a technical fix but a redistribution of communicative sovereignty towards movements that currently depend on hostile platforms. Likewise, foreign and domestic policy need to treat hashtag publics as real political constituencies whose safety and privacy are matters of security, not branding.

At the same time, the analysis suggests a reflexive task for scholars and activists. Research agendas that centre localized epistemologies, study AI and moderation not in the abstract but in their caste, race, and language effects, and trace online-offline circuits of repression and care are crucial if scholarship is not to mirror the same Euro-American bias it critiques. Movements, in turn, must continue experimenting with hybrid tactics: using high-visibility platforms strategically while building slower, safer infrastructures for deliberation and care. The central claim that emerges is not that digital feminism is doomed or saved by technology, but that its transformative potential hinges on whether governance, infrastructure, and knowledge production can be reoriented from extraction to reciprocity. Without that shift, digital gender politics will extend colonial logics into a new domain; with it, the same infrastructures might yet turn hypervisibility from a site of peril into a resource for durable, situated feminist power.

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