

Research Article

Gender and Peacebuilding Challenges in the New-Media Digital Age

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Abstract

New media and digital technologies have revolutionised how social movements and peacebuilding are organised, communicated and sustained. New-media has provided platforms for advocacy, mobilisation and resistance. While contemporary digital tools offer platforms for community knowledge sharing, they threaten inclusivity, equity and safety in online and offline spaces. The digital age has amplified gendered challenges, exacerbating inequalities, violence and systemic exclusions that hinder women and marginalised groups' participation in digital activism and peace efforts. This paper explores the intersections of gender, technology and activism, critically examining how new-media is a site for empowerment and oppression. An examination of how women and LGBTQI+ individuals navigate digital activism and peacebuilding amid rising online harassment, misinformation, algorithmic discrimination and structural inequalities cannot be negated. Via an intersectional lens, this paper explores the role of gender in digital peacebuilding, addressing key issues such as cybersecurity threats against women activists, gender-based violence in virtual spaces, the digital divide and exclusion of vulnerable voices. The paper highlights innovative strategies employed by feminist and grassroots movements to leverage digital storytelling, artificial intelligence and social media to counter oppression, advocate for justice and foster sustainable peace. By engaging with critical debates at the intersection of gender, technology and peacebuilding, this paper broadens discussions on the risks and possibilities of digital spaces. A significant transformation in content creation, increasingly intersecting with activism, positioning individuals as storytellers and agents of social change. In evolving digital landscapes, communicators must comply with digital codes of conduct to ensure narratives are responsibly crafted for accessibility, ethically grounded and inclusive. Challenging and redressing omissions and biases perpetuated by mainstream media is essential. The paper argues for inclusive policy-driven and community-based solutions to ensure that new-media can be an intervention for empowerment, mitigating gendered marginalisation.

Keywords: activism, digital peacebuilding, gender, intersectionality, new-media, online violence, social movements

1. Introduction

New-media technologies have altered the landscape of peacebuilding and social justice advocacy. Media and communication scholars (Ali, Yimam, Semmann, Ayele and Biemann, 2024; Adebayo, 2021) have indicated that digital platforms are no longer simple media tools. Rather, they have evolved into complex socio-technical ecosystems that shape public discourse, reinforce power relations, and influence the reproduction of social, political, and economic inequalities. These new media technologies have become vibrant, living ecosystems that shape our view of the world, inform public dialogues and influence policy frameworks. Increased access to social media, mobile applications and proliferation of digital tools have redefined how communities broader, resist and build cross-border coalitions. The spread of misinformation on new-media platforms has deleterious consequences. Precise inclusive content creation and ethical media framing protocol are fundamental to mitigate exclusion and amplify marginalised voices. As digital platforms evolve, so do associated complexities, particularly in the gendered context of equity. Women and LGBTQI+ persons face disproportionate risks, from online harassment to algorithmic bias, that challenge their participation in digital peacebuilding (Im, Schoenebeck, Iriarte, Grill, Wilkinson, Batool and Naseem, 2023). This paper explores the dual role of digital technologies as both empowering and oppressive.

LGBTQI+ Persons in the Context of Digital Peacebuilding

Contextually, peacebuilding in a new-media digital age must recognise and include LGBTQI+ persons whose gender identity, expression or experience exists beyond the traditional binary constructs of male and female. This inclusivity encompasses non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, two-spirit (Indigenous cultures) and transgender identities. Identities reflect personal gender experiences and inner self-consciousness aligned to sex/gender birth classification, which manifests externally through appearance, behaviour and social roles. The range of identities is outside of, or in contrast to, conventional categories of “man” and “woman.” Gender-diversity is an inclusive linguistic expression recognising a spectrum of identities across cultures, histories and experiences. Digital peacebuilding spaces constitute activism, dialogue, resistance and mediation. The visibility of gender diversity is symbolic and essential in fostering equitable and sustainable peace (Our Secure Future, 2020). Digital spheres have become empowerment sites and a battleground for identity politics. LGBTQI+ activists lead transformative initiatives simultaneously facing heightened risks of online gender based (GBV), misrepresentation, algorithmic erasure and decision-making exclusion. Gender-diversity serves as a linguistic recognition of the rich spectrum of identities and a political imperative for inclusive peace work. A framework that fails to account for diversity risks reproducing hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. LGBTQI+ voices enhance legitimacy, relevance, and effectiveness of conflict transformation processes (Dharmapuri and Shoemaker, 2020). Gender identity is a personal internalised experience linked to sex birth assignment, externally presented in clothing, behaviour and appearance.

2. Conceptual framework

Grounded in feminist theory, the analytical lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), integrating digital feminist frameworks with peace and conflict studies, offers a critical foundation for examining power dynamics within digital peacebuilding contexts. Intersectionality explores how gender, race, class and geography intersect in shaping digital experiences (Sharkey, 2018). Feminist theory challenges patriarchal structures prioritising marginalised women and LGBTQI+ communities. Intersectionality highlights the reproduction of systemic inequalities in digital spaces. As a conceptual tool, intersectionality enables the disaggregation of identities by exposing gender intersections of race, class, sexuality, ability, geography and axes of identity (IFWPH, 2022; Ali, Yimam, Semmann, Ayele and Biemann, 2024). In the digital age, intersectionality is valuable in examining the nuanced and overlapping experiences of individuals who engage in digital activism. A layered understanding of digital participation, algorithmic exclusion, online GBV and representation are shaped by sociopolitical hierarchies (Khatri, 2024). Integrating digital feminism frameworks interrogates technologies usage for resistance and advocacy (Sreeja, 2023). Digital feminism considers the empowering potential of technology and embedded biases, highlighting how infrastructures reinforce and challenge systemic hierarchies. In peace and conflict studies, digital tool deployment promotes inclusive peacebuilding and marginalising dissenting voices (Pucelj, 2024). Theoretical anchors such as cyberfeminism, postcolonial feminism and feminist peacebuilding theories (Sharkey, 2018), challenge gender norms and emphasise the embodied experiences of women. Postcolonial-feminism recognises global south inequities that shape access to and use of digital tools, among women. Feminist peacebuilding theories emphasis on relational, grassroots participatory conflict resolution, are infrequent in peace discourses (Peace Agency, 2024).

3. Methodological approach

The methodological approach is qualitative with an interpretative paradigm, drawing on secondary literature, policy reports and case studies; that showcase digital feminist interventions and peacebuilding strategies. A qualitative and interpretive methodology, enable in-depth exploration of meanings, experiences and social patterns rather than statistical generalisation. Rooted in a constructivist epistemology, theorising the social, contextual, personality and powers constructs of knowledge in the new digital age. Multiple intersecting methodological strategies that guide the research include document analysis reviews, secondary literature including peer-reviewed journal articles, NGO and UN policy reports and digital media archives. A case study method focuses on selected feminist digital peace initiatives, these include #HerStoryforPeace, #DigitalSisterhood and #SayHerName campaigns, to understand how women and LGBTQI+ actors navigate digital activism (UNITAR, 2020). Discourse analysis facilitates examination of language, narrative and power within digital platforms, on how gendered identities are constructed, contested or erased. Critical policy analysis is crucial for evaluating digital governance policies and international frameworks for online GBV, cybersecurity and women's participation in peacebuilding. When available, the study engages with grey literature, blogs, social media, digital storytelling archives and activists' toolkits to capture grassroots and forms of knowledge production. Research ethics compliance, ensured critical reflexivity, prioritising

the voices of marginalised groups; avoiding harm by preventing re-circulation of violent or re-traumatising content. This methodology allows a nuanced investigation of digital gendered peacebuilding, recognising the complex interplay between online empowerment, resistance and systemic exclusion (Our Secure Future, 2020).

4. New-media and gendered participation in peacebuilding

New media-amplified historically, silenced voices with Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, facilitating campaigns like #BringBackOurGirls, #MeToo and #SayHerName (UNITAR, 2020). Despite increased visibility, structural inequalities remain embedded within digital platforms. While women peacebuilders encounter digital surveillance, platform censorship and exclusion arise from strategic online decision-making (UN Women, 2023).

In 2014 #BringBackOurGirls was a response to the abduction of 276 Nigerian schoolgirls by the Boko Haram in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria. #BringBackOurGirls which began as a grassroots campaign led by Nigerian women activists, quickly gained international prominence through various social media platforms (Oduor and Mutsvairo, 2018). The hashtag became a global rallying point as protesters demanded the Nigerian government as well as the international community to take action towards rescuing the kidnapped girls. #BringBackOurGirls campaigned vigorously for the gendered nature of terrorism and conflict, promoting 'girls' education and safety, illustrating how digital platforms mobilise cross-border solidarity, amplify marginalised voices and demand accountability. #Initiatives exposed challenges sustaining international attention and political will over time (Adebayo, 2021).

The #MeToo campaign, established in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke, was reignited in 2017 following high-profile sexual assaults and allegations linked to Harvey Weinstein in Hollywood (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). #MeToo evolved into a global digital movement highlighting the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and GBV against LGBTQI+ persons. As survivors shared their harrowing stories across social media, the hashtag, thus, evolved into a collective form of testimony and resistance, challenging deeply entrenched systems of power and silence. It transformed online platforms into space for solidarity, healing and institutional accountability and from workplaces to peacebuilding contexts. Despite criticisms of exclusion and digital backlash, the movement has reshaped public discourse on GBV and influenced legal and policy reforms globally (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2019).

#SayHerName debuted in 2014 via the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) to foreground Black girl children and women state victims of American police brutality and GBV (Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer and Harris, 2015). #SayHerName advances a narrative that Black women are victims of police racial brutality, GBV and injustice, dominated by male victims' stories. The campaign's digital activism reclaims visibility for Taylor and Bland, intersecting gender, race and state GBV. #SayHerName emphasises intersectionality insisting that any justice movement must consider Black women's vulnerabilities. #SayHerName exposes systemic gendered racism and calls for inclusive approaches to justice, accountability and community healing online and offline (Thomas and Hirschfield, 2018). Bland 28 and Taylor 26, both Black American women whose untimely deaths became highly symbolic in the fight against racial injustice and state-sanctioned brutality in the United States, through digital movements like #SayHerName (Lovelace, 2020). Bland and Taylors' cases highlight often-overlooked gendered dimensions of police brutality and GBV. Bland was a race and gender advocate promoting justice and demanding police accountability (Harris, 2018).

A routine traffic violation on July 10, 2015, spiraled into a violent arrest culminating in suicide 72 hours later on July 13, 2015 (Brooks and Sarabia, 2019), which sparked outrage and questions on racial profiling, police misconduct and the criminalisation of Black women (Orbe, 2017). Activists exposed inconsistencies in systemic police failures that devalued Black women's lives. Bland's case was a catalyst for the #SayHerName, which sparked a conversation on racialised and gendered state GBV (Smith, 2019). Taylor, an emergency medical technician, (Martin, 2021) killed on March 13, 2020. Police executed a no-knock warrant while she was asleep; Taylor was shot repeatedly during the raid, which intended to target a suspect with no connection to Taylor (Cook, 2022). Her untimely death, delayed arrests and absent accountability, triggered national protests as part of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and elevated the #SayHerName. Taylor became a rallying point for police reform, anti-racist advocacy and justice for Black women killed by police (Brown and Ray, 2020). Social media movements demonstrate how hashtags and digital virality have transformed traditional journalism, allowing activists to shape views via global news agendas. The reality is that platform algorithms can either sustain a social justice campaign nor quickly bury the same, making strategic media engagement crucial.

5. Digital violence and cybersecurity threats

Online GBV, include doxxing, stalking and trolling, have become increasingly normalised. Doxxing is intentional, openly exposing confidential recognisable data, residential addresses, phone numbers, workplaces, or financial details, without prior consent, intended to harass, intimidate and threaten (Douglas, 2016). Douglas (2016) argues that doxxing constitutes a violation of informational privacy, digital autonomy and is online vigilantism with ethical implications. According to Reynolds, Henson and Fisher (2012), cyberstalking is online harassment with persistent unwanted surveillance, communication, or threats using emails, social media, GPS tracking, or messaging. Cyberstalking induces fear and distress and can include monitoring and direct contact. Reynolds, Henson and Fisher (2012) highlight the prevalence and psychological impacts of cyberstalking among youth, framing it as a digital extension of traditional stalking that requires targeted prevention strategies. Trolling is deliberately posting provocative, offensive, or inflammatory messages online, on social media intending to upset, provoke, or disrupt (Hardaker, 2010), and involves sarcasm, impersonation, cyberbullying, hate speech or harassment. Hardaker's (2010) study categorises trolling as a spectrum of antagonistic behaviours, emphasising its impact with online civility and group cohesion. Amnesty International (2024) reports that over 70% of women are victims of cyber GBV, with activists and journalists being especially vulnerable. The absence of enforceable digital rights frameworks aggravates risks, creating hostile environments for women activists. Communication specialists must collaborate with journalists and activists

for the co-creation of technologies to build ethical content; filters and reporting mechanisms that protect women and LGBTQI+ individuals without silencing them. Media and communication scholars (Ali, Yimam, Semmann, Ayele and Biemann, 2024; Adebayo, 2021) consider broadcast and digital media, indicating newsroom protocols require revision to address online GBV, in particular when reporting on activism and vulnerable communities.

6. The digital-divide and access to peacebuilding platforms

The digital-divide remains a critical barrier to inclusive peacebuilding in the new-media age, manifesting unequal access to infrastructure, literacy and participation. The divide is deeply structural, reinforcing gender, class, race and geographical inequalities. Access to digital platforms, virtual dialogues, early warning systems, digital storytelling and social media mobilisation mandates stable internet access, devices and competencies. Disparities in conflict and post-conflict settings, among women, rural populations, displaced persons and LGBTQI+ groups (Robinson, Cotten, Ono, Quan-Haase, Mesch, Chen and Stern, 2020) is a global problem. Women's mobile and internet access recorded by GSMA (2022) found that women are 16% less likely to secure access than men (UN WFP 2023), this number increases to 37% in Sub-Saharan Africa (UN Women, 2023). Digital disparities impede women's participation in peacebuilding, virtual mediation and civic tech innovations (UN Women, 2018). Digital exclusion restricts women's voices in peace perpetuating digital GBV. Limited digital literacy increases harassment, misinformation and exploitation with absent reporting of threats (Dig Watch, 2024). The divide compounds representation and safety. "Without targeted interventions, digital peacebuilding efforts risk becoming elite-driven and gender-exclusionary, reinforcing offline inequalities in virtual spaces" (UN Women, 2023). Geopolitical conflict affect regions often lack digital infrastructure, for example, Yemen, Central African Republic, South Africa and Myanmar enjoy limited electricity, high data costs and state-imposed shutdowns make sustained online engagement nearly impossible (GSMA, 2022). Even when platforms exist, language barriers and inaccessible interfaces further exclusion of Indigenous and minority populations from discourse (UN Women, 2020).

An intersectional lens reveals how digital access is shaped by overlapping axes of exclusion. A rural, low-income women with a disability, LGBTQI+ in the South, face compounded challenges accessing digital peace platforms. Intersectionality challenges a techno-solutionist approaches to peacebuilding that fail to consider deep-rooted social hierarchies embedded in new-media (Robinson, Cotten, Ono, Quan-Haase, Mesch, Chen and Stern, 2020). Efforts to bridge the digital-divide in peacebuilding include community-based digital literacy programmes, targeting marginalised persons; localised content and interfaces in local languages; infrastructure development in conflict regions; and policy reforms ensuring affordable, secure and equitable access (O'Donnell, Milliken, Chong and Falch, 2021). The Digital Access Index developed by ITU (2021) assesses regional connectivity and inequalities. UNDP's digital strategy and #HerStoryforPeace by UNITAR (2020) illustrates the potential of targeted interventions to empower women peacebuilders technologically (FP Analytics, 2021).

The digital-divide remains unequal along geography, and gender in low-income regions, women confronting poor access, insufficient digital skills and restricted access to financial and health literacy. New-media must intensify efforts on sharing stories in multiple languages with local communities at the centre of peace building initiatives. Prioritising authentic inclusivity in digital spaces is critical in the fight against marginalised persons. It is essential to recognise that while access to devices is imperative, helping communities share who they are, their lived experiences and hopes for the future is equally important. Fundamentally, new-media must develop strategies that support interventions that reflect community culture and context.

7. Algorithmic discrimination and gender bias in artificial intelligence

Algorithmic bias further compromises digital peacebuilding participation. Search engines and recommendations amplify patriarchal and racialised content, silencing and stereotyping minorities UNESCO (2022). Artificial Intelligence (AI) replicates societal biases unless explicitly corrected, this challenges the neutrality of technological tools and demands a critical revaluation of how AI is deployed in peacebuilding (Golovchenko et al., 2023). As digital peacebuilding and activism increasingly rely on algorithm technologies, content moderation systems, search engines, facial recognition and machine learning, there is a growing concern about how AI perpetuates gender bias and algorithmic discrimination (Kujenga, 2025). Biases are not neutral technological glitches but reflect broader societal inequalities encoded into the digital architectures that shape participation, visibility and safety online (Eubanks, 2018). Algorithmic discrimination is embedded in systemic biases that provide differential approaches and exclusion of race, gender, age, language and geography (IFVPH, 2022; Eubanks, 2018).

A dialectic manifestation of gender includes (Golovchenko et al., 2023), (a) A design bias with algorithms biased datasets promoting historical and systemic inequities and (b) Using AI in the absence of regulatory safeguards or inclusive principles, fortifies structural exclusion. AI in content filtering, recruitment, surveillance and social media amplification have revealed a disproportionately for women, LGBTQ+, race, when intersecting with non-normative identities (Gillespie, 2018; Noble, 2018). Gillespie (2018) and Noble (2018) documented gendered algorithmic harms in automated moderation that disproportionately flag feminist content or LGBTQ+ speech as "inappropriate" or "violent," while failing to detect GBV and hate speech (Gillespie, 2018; Noble, 2018), silencing feminist digital peacebuilders. Facial recognition, gendered and racial algorithms are significantly bias (Buolamwini and Gebru, 2018) with commercial AI error. Noble (2018) reveals that search engines replicate and amplify gender and racial stereotypes, with queries on "Black girls" once yielding hypersexualised or pornographic results, demonstrating AI mirrored bias (Golovchenko et al., 2023). AI tools used for security risk profiling disproportionately target women activists, in authoritarian or militarised contexts (Latonero, 2018).

Algorithmic bias has profound implications for inclusive peacebuilding, limiting the marginalised visibility and influence, distorting online dialogue and exacerbating digital insecurity, for peacebuilders (Buolamwini and Gebru, 2018). When algorithms prioritise privileged global north voices and suppress dissenting global South voices, the narrative shapes peace negotiation and justice. AI used in humanitarian resource allocation and digital verification, unwittingly excludes women based on mismatched data, inadequate design thereby reinforcing inequality (Kujenga, 2025). Reducing AI gender bias necessitates

multidimensional strategies prioritising training data representative of gender, race, geography and language. Incorporating values of care, equity and transparency in developing AI, enforces accountability via algorithmic audits, ethical guidelines and impact assessments. Integrating LGBTQI+ voices in AI design, deployment and governance is essential (Kujenga, 2025).

8. Feminist digital interventions and case studies

Feminist digital activism response to challenges relied on creativity and resilience. The *Digital Sisterhood* network in North Africa, trains women in digital security (Bailey and Steeves, 2015). The *Peace Agency* (2024) uses AI to monitor hate speech against women peacebuilders.

#HerStoryforPeace (UNITAR, 2021), an African led initiative, leverages digital storytelling to support women peacebuilders. These movements demonstrate the transformative potential of inclusive new-media (Adebayo, 2021). In response to gendered inequities, algorithmic discrimination and digital GBV online, feminist activists and collectives have developed digital interventions. Leveraging new-media to disrupt oppressive narratives, amplify voices and deliver inclusive, participatory frameworks for peacebuilding transformation. Interventions rooted in cyberfeminism and intersectionality emphasise the agency of women and LGBTQI+ individuals shaping technologies and resisting systemic online biases (Daniels, 2009; Haraway, 1991). Digital interventions are practical and political, campaigns focus on community projects, education, healing and resistance.

The *#SayHerName* campaigns use of storytelling, visual media and online memorialisation amplified the lived experiences of Black women victims Bland and Taylor (Brown and Ray, 2020). The campaign not only challenged racialised patriarchy, it functioned as a digital archive of state-sanctioned GBV, contributing to the collective memory and resistance in peacebuilding (Clark, 2020). The *Digital Sisterhood Network*, a grassroots initiative operating across North Africa, focuses on digital literacy, digital security training and for community-led storytelling for women, supporting feminist peacebuilders navigating repressive digital environments. Through encrypted platforms and feminist tech circles, interventions foster safe political and civic participation (Bailey and Steeves, 2015). *Digital Sisterhood* exemplifies how feminist interventions resist technological and political marginalisation, under authoritarian regimes or post-conflict transitions.

#HerStoryforPeace, led by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR, 2021), provides capacity-building for African women mediators using digital storytelling and online peacebuilding tools. Participants learn to create short films, write blogs and establish advocacy campaigns that reframe women's roles in peace processes while challenging stereotypes (UNITAR, 2021). Blending digital media with participatory peacebuilding, *#HerStoryforPeace* represents a hybrid model of activism and storytelling centred on African feminist epistemologies. The *#MeToo* movement empowered millions of survivors to share lived sexual harassment and abuse experiences, the social media advocacy campaign became a catalyst for institutional accountability, policy change and cultural transformation (Mendes et al., 2019). While critiques contest class and race inclusivity limitations, it remains significant in 21st century digital mobilisation, illustrating the power of viral digital storytelling in shaping peace and promoting justice.

Tech collectives such as *#TakeBacktheTech* initiated by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and Digital Defenders Partnership work with local communities to co-create technologies prioritising user safety, confidentiality and agency. *#TakeBacktheTech* provide open-source tools for digital self-defence, trauma-informed design practices and peer-led digital security trainings tailored for LGBTQI+ and vulnerable populations (APC, 2020), to combat technology-related GBV. *#TakeBacktheTech* provides online advocacy and policy dialogue on tech governance. The *#TakeBacktheTech* campaign operates in multiple languages and regions, ensuring intersectional accessibility (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2017).

#Initiatives demonstrates how feminist digital interventions can move beyond awareness-raising into tactical resistance and policy influence in the digital governance. Core components of digital interventions rely on personal narratives transformed into political tools for justice and healing. Grassroots developments and deployment prioritise community needs consider multiple axes of race, class, gender, ability and geography and emphasis on digital safety, trauma-informed practices and mutual support (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). Communication practitioners must serve as intermediaries who translate complex policy discourse into community-relevant language and storytelling. Policy shifts can only be impactful with robust public communication strategies while promoting ownership and grassroots participation.

9. Community-based and policy solutions

Gender-based digital exclusion in peacebuilding requires a citizen science strategy. Community-based digital literacy programs, feminist tech cooperatives and localised internet governance models intersect to promote safe digital environments. Simultaneously, international regulatory bodies must enforce digital rights promoting accountability (UN Women, 2024). Accountability will secure digital spaces as inclusive peacebuilding platforms rather than amplifiers of inequalities. Multi-level responses, community-driven approaches with robust policy and governance frameworks, can prioritise exclusion, GBV and algorithmic bias. Interventions must be locally-rooted, globally-responsive, culturally-relevant and structurally-transformative (UN Women, 2020). Community-driven initiatives are pivotal in democratising access to technology, enhancing digital safety and empowering marginalised groups as agents of change.

Interventions typically emphasise participation, localisation and collective care. While digital literacy remains a critical barrier to accessing peacebuilding in low-income and post-conflict settings, feminist organisations and grassroots networks have responded with community-based literacy workshops, these initiatives do more than teach technical skills, they cultivate critical digital agency, enabling navigation of platforms, challenge online GBV and advocate for justice. Framed as a civic and political skill, literacy strengthens community resilience and democratic participation (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2017). Decentralised, community-owned platforms for digital peace dialogue, encrypted messaging groups, mobile storytelling

applications and radio-integrated platforms mediate disputes, document injustice and amplify women's peacebuilding. These platforms bypass elitist or centralised digital infrastructures, offering accessible, multilingual and culturally grounded alternatives (Denskus and Esser, 2015). While grassroots interventions are vital, they must be supported by enabling policies and regulatory frameworks that address structural inequalities in digital governance, data rights and online safety. A rights-based approach to digital governance advocates for gender-sensitive frameworks recognising digital access as a human right. Universal access to affordable internet; anti-surveillance protections for activists; and digital non-discrimination policies that prohibit algorithmic bias in public and private systems (UNESCO, 2022). Policies must go beyond infrastructure to address gendered power relations in digital economies and governance. International cybersecurity policies remain gender-neutral, ignoring gendered threats. Feminist scholars call for gender-transformative policies, which criminalise online GBV, mandating online platforms to report and mitigate GBV, doxxing, stalking and trolling, regulating transparency and accountability in content moderation algorithms (Henry and Powell, 2018).

Policy reforms must regulate the development and deployment of AI in peacebuilding. Feminist data justice approaches demand inclusive representation in datasets, reasonable AI systems and community-led impact assessments before digital tools are rolled out in conflict zones (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020). Practical solutions at the intersection of grassroots activism and policy influence require participatory policy-making processes involving feminist and indigenous tech experts to co-design peacebuilding platforms with embedded community accountability mechanisms. Hybrid governance models, multi-stakeholder forums with governments, civil society, tech companies and academia ensures community voices inform policy that create innovation (UN Women, 2020).

10. Critical reflections on inclusivity and empowerment

While new digital technologies offer significant opportunities for amplifying marginalised voices and facilitating grassroots peacebuilding, it is essential to continuously but critically examine meanings of inclusivity and empowerment. Peace discourse concepts with implicit assumptions of neutrality and progress, are fraught with power dynamics, contextual limitations and structural exclusions that require sustained interrogation. Inclusivity in digital peacebuilding is measured quantitatively with technological access, internet penetration and participation indicators. Such metrics obscure profound qualitative questions about meaningful participation, power asymmetries and inclusion. When digital peace platforms invite marginalised groups without addressing language, digital literacy, or algorithmic bias, they risk reproducing tokenism rather than fostering inclusion (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2017). Similarly, participation that is surveyed, decontextualised, or controlled by external stakeholders may erode local agency rather than strengthen it (Zuboff, 2019). "The rhetoric of digital inclusion often masks the material and symbolic exclusions embedded within techno-social systems" (Eubanks, 2018). Inclusivity must, therefore, be redefined not as mere presence but as the ability to shape, contest and co-create peaceful systems.

11. Interrogating empowerment, from buzzwords to praxis

As a result of the widely celebrated, the conceptual contestation of empowerment in digital peacebuilding, often framed as providing tools, skills, or platforms to marginalised populations. However, feminist scholars argue that such frameworks risk individualising empowerment, burdening the oppressed to adapt rather than institutions to transform (Cornwall, 2016). Teaching women digital skills without simultaneously addressing online harassment, state surveillance and algorithmic marginalisation may lead to partial empowerment and new forms of vulnerability. "Empowerment without transformation of structural conditions risks co-opting feminist struggles into neoliberal agendas" (Mohanty, 2003). A relational and collective understanding of empowerment rooted in solidarity, mutual accountability and systemic critique is mandated to ensure that digital tools serve emancipatory ends rather than reproducing hierarchies of voice and visibility. Efforts to foster inclusivity and empowerment rely on standardised solutions, which overlook intersecting oppressions based on gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and geography (Hudson, Ballif-Spanvill, Caprioli and Emmett, 2008). An intersectional lens reveals that a rural women, LGBTQI+ persons with disabilities in the South, experience digital spaces differently from the same rural men in the North. Intersectionality is not simply an analytical tool but a political orientation towards justice prioritising the marginalised in theory and practice (Collins and Bilge, 2020). Digital peacebuilding platforms must be context-sensitive and community-driven, designed for access, agency, safety and sustainability.

12. Conclusion

The digital age offers incalculable possibilities for reimagining peacebuilding and mitigating new risks and exclusions. A gender-transformative approach to digital activism is essential to ensure peacebuilding efforts are inclusive, safe and sustainable. Policymakers, technologists and activists must collaborate to build a feminist digital infrastructure that resists surveillance, promotes equity and fosters collective care. Critical reflection demands a shift from inclusion within existing systems to transforming systems, mandating designing platforms rather than for communities. Achieved by valuing indigenous knowledge systems, storytelling and oral traditions alongside digital data are inevitable. Embedding ethics of care and digital justice into peacebuilding strategies allows digital empowerment beyond representation or access; it must be about redistributing power, redefining participation and reclaiming voices in spaces shaped by historical exclusion. New-age storytellers, media professionals and activists have the unique power to turn complex issues into human stories that spark empathy and drive social change. The future of peace communication lies in working symbiotically with communities so that their voices are authentically endorsed, venerated and revealed with empathy, accountability and integrity. Digital empowerment requires interrogation to determine: Who gets to define empowerment? Who benefits from digital peacebuilding initiatives? As digital spaces become central to democratic activism, initiatives must prioritise the lived realities of marginalised communities, incorporating Indigenous, LGBTQI+ and postcolonial perspectives.

Declarations:

- Originality statement: I/we, Mariam Seedat-Khan and Alan Khan confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been previously published, and is not under review elsewhere.
- Author approval Statement: I/we, Mariam Seedat-Khan and Alan Khan, confirm that all authors have read and approved the submitted manuscript, and the author order has been agreed upon by all co-authors.
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