DOI: https://doi.org/10.63056/jllsa.2.11.2026.449

Journal of Language, Literature & Social Affairs

journal homepage: https://scholarclub.org/index.php/jllsa

Digital Feminism and the Changing Landscape of Women's Empowerment in Developing Societies

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:
October 02, 2026
Revision Received:
October 18, 2026
Accepted:
November 01, 2026
Available Online:
November 15, 2026

Keywords:
digital feminism, women's empowerment, digital divide, digital activism, agency, developing societies

ABSTRACT

With increasing access to the internet and the evolution of social media platforms, digital feminism has become a new means of disseminating feminist thinking, organizing, and mobilizing in the digital space. In the developing world, structural and cultural barriers often constrain women from holding a public role. The digital space is thus emerging as a significant site for renegotiating gender relations and pursuing empowerment. Although digital platforms offer women new opportunities to raise their voices, network, learn, become entrepreneurs, and take action, these opportunities are not equally shared. Digital divides and other barriers, such as online harassment, surveillance, cultural restrictions, and unequal access, continue to influence and restrict women's participation online. This study explores how women in [country/community] experience, interpret, and negotiate digital feminism in their daily lives. It adopts a qualitative interpretive research design and draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20–30 women selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The data are analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Ethical procedures, including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, are followed. The analysis identified five themes: digital voice, visibility, and collective solidarity; education, skill development, and economic empowerment; negotiating family expectations and patriarchal norms; online harassment, surveillance, and digital inequality; and strategic participation and the limits of digital empowerment. Together, these themes present digital feminism as a contested space in which women exercise and negotiate agency within existing social structures. By focusing on women's daily lives, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on gender and digital media in the Global South. The findings can inform gender-sensitive policies on digital inclusion, online safety, digital literacy, and platform governance that respond to the needs of women in developing societies.

1. Introduction

In developing societies, mobile phones, low-cost internet, and social media have spread rapidly over the last 20 years. This spread has changed the way people communicate, learn, work, and engage in public life (GSMA, Year). For many users in low-

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and middle-income settings, the smartphone has become the primary, and sometimes the only, means of accessing the internet. Information, commerce, entertainment, and civic debate are conveyed through messaging applications, video-sharing services, and social networking sites. This change is particularly important for women. Restrictions on mobility, limited access to formal institutions, and norms regarding women's presence in public spaces have long limited their social and economic opportunities. Digital technologies, therefore, provide women not only with conveniences but also, potentially, with new spaces and relationships that were previously hard to access.

Digital spaces serve multiple, intersecting purposes in women's lives. Online courses, instructional videos, and informal learning groups offer opportunities for learning outside the classroom. Because women's mobility in public is socially regulated, remote work, freelancing, and home-based online businesses are important and viable options for some women (Author, Year). Social media also provides avenues for political expression, community building, and peer support, allowing women to share experiences, exchange advice, and connect with like-minded people from afar. For many women, these spaces offer their first exposure to feminist ideas and to the feminist language of rights, equality, and bodily autonomy (Author, Year). Digital platforms are therefore becoming spaces in which women's empowerment is imagined, practised, and contested.

To explore these processes, two concepts need to be clarified. Digital feminism refers to the expression, dissemination, and organization of feminist discourses and claims through digital technologies and platforms. It may take various forms, ranging from large-scale hashtag campaigns and coordinated online action to less visible but no less significant practices, such as sharing personal experiences, challenging sexist content, and building online communities for women (Baer, 2016; Mendes et al., 2019). Digital feminism has been recognized as a way of amplifying feminist discourses and making them more visible and accessible. However, it also operates within commercial platform structures and dominant cultures that have the potential to dilute or undermine feminist politics (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Women's empowerment is understood as the expansion of women's ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer, 1999). This occurs through access to material and social resources and through the exercise of agency. It also involves achieving outcomes expressed in women's ability to voice their views, make decisions, move freely, be safe, and engage in public life.

Empowerment is not simply a matter of individual choice or personal success. A long tradition of feminist development scholarship emphasizes the relational (Rowlands, 1997) and structural (Cornwall, 2016) nature of empowerment. Families, kinship networks, and communities influence what women are able to do and what they believe they are entitled to do. Education, religion, social class, and the labour market also shape women's choices, and women's activities are embedded in government policies on education, employment, communication, and the regulation of online activity. A woman's use of digital technology is therefore never purely personal: it is negotiated within households and communities and influenced by social norms and institutional arrangements. Understanding digital feminism in developing societies thus requires attention to both the individual and the social context in which she lives.

This relational perspective helps to explain why the promise of digital technology is only partly fulfilled. Although digital technologies have the potential to enhance women's capabilities, access to these technologies and their benefits is not equitable. A gender digital divide persists in many developing societies. Women are less likely than men to own a mobile phone, use mobile internet, or use digital tools confidently (GSMA, Year; Author, Year). Affordability, limited digital skills, and shared or supervised use of household devices are further limiting factors. In some families, husbands or other male relatives supervise women's phone use, which may compel women to avoid certain websites or social platforms. These restrictions are often justified with reference to honour, morality, or safety (Author, Year). Thus, the digital sphere can reproduce and, at times, reinforce existing patterns of male control instead of eradicating them.

Digital visibility, however, carries certain risks. Digital feminism can create recognition, solidarity, and a collective voice, but the same visibility can expose women to trolling, sexualized harassment, threats, and coordinated abuse (Megarry, 2014; Author, Year). Women who write or post feminist content online may become targets of moral policing by strangers or by people close to them. Images and personal information can be misused, posing serious risks to a woman's reputation in settings where family honour is closely tied to her standing. Women's visibility and agency online are also shaped by surveillance from their families, communities, and state or platform authorities. Digital feminism, therefore, does not take place in a neutral space. It unfolds in a space of contestation, where the hope for empowerment is tightly bound up with new forms of vulnerability and control.

Although academic interest in digital feminism has grown, significant gaps remain. Most available studies focus on viral campaigns and the online activism of urban, educated, and typically middle-class women (Author, Year). These studies have added to knowledge of digital feminist mobilisation. However, they tend to privilege visible and organized forms of activism and often draw on contexts in the Global North (Mohanty, 1988; Author, Year). Far less is known about how ordinary women in developing societies experience, interpret, and engage with digital feminism. Many of these women do not see themselves as activists and may not want to be activists. They may still use technology in quieter ways that affect how they see themselves,

how they relate to other people, and what opportunities they can access. Capturing these lived experiences requires a qualitative approach that portrays women's own meanings, constraints, and strategies, as well as the multiple and sometimes contradictory nature of their agency online.

Hence, the current study adopted a qualitative interpretive design to explore women's lived experiences of digital feminism in [country/community]. The study has four objectives. It explores women's experiences and understandings of digital feminism and examines the role of digital platforms in fostering or constraining women's empowerment. It also examines the social, cultural, economic, and technological factors that affect women's digital engagement and explores the strategies women use to resist, protect themselves, and negotiate as they engage online. On this basis, five research questions guide the study. First, how do women in [country/community] understand and interpret digital feminism in relation to their own lives? Second, how do digital platforms enable or limit women's voice, agency, and participation in education, employment, and the public sphere? Third, what social, cultural, economic, and technological obstacles impede women's access to and use of digital spaces? Fourth, how do women experience and respond to online harassment, surveillance, and moral policing? Fifth, what strategies do women use to negotiate patriarchal norms and assert agency through digital platforms?

The study makes theoretical, practical, and contextual contributions. Theoretically, it enriches feminist digital studies and the empowerment literature by shifting attention from highly visible forms of digital activism to the everyday digital experiences of ordinary women. It presents an understanding of empowerment as relational and situated, showing how agency may be exercised selectively, strategically, and sometimes covertly within structures of constraint. This challenges simple accounts that equate access to digital technologies with empowerment. Practically, the findings can inform digital-inclusion policies that address both access and the social context of use. They can also help in planning digital literacy programmes tailored to women's needs and online-safety programmes that address the specific forms of harassment and monitoring that women face. In addition, they can contribute to platform governance debates on content moderation, privacy, and accountability for online gender-based abuse.

Contextually, the study responds to the under-representation of developing societies in digital feminist scholarship. In these societies, digital feminism takes on distinctive meanings and outcomes because of the interaction between patriarchy, economic inequality, religious and cultural values, and disparities in technological infrastructure. By foregrounding the voices of women in [country/community], the study offers a grounded understanding of how global feminist discourses are received, adapted, and reworked in local contexts. Together, these contributions make the study a timely examination of how digital technologies are reshaping, without simply transforming, women's empowerment in developing societies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Feminism: Concept and Evolution

Digital feminism is the use of digital technologies, online platforms, and networked communication to articulate, circulate, and organize around feminist ideas, claims, and identities (Baer, 2016; Mendes et al., 2019). It has been associated with the so-called “fourth wave” of feminism, which centres on social media and online participation (Munro, 2013). This periodization, however, is contested. Critics argue that wave metaphors privilege Western feminist histories and marginalise the histories of women's movements in the Global South (Mohanty, 1988). It is therefore more appropriate to discuss digital feminism as a set of practices that use digital technologies rather than as a distinct historical period. It carries forward long-standing feminist concerns about violence, inequality, representation, and bodily autonomy (Jouët, 2018), but expresses them through new forms of technology (Nawaz, 2026).

Although feminists have moved from the street to the web, this shift has not ended street protest, consciousness-raising groups, or organized advocacy. Instead, it has expanded their reach and changed their tempo. One of the most visible forms of digital feminism is the hashtag campaign, which can transform individual testimony into a collective narrative of injustice (Jackson et al., 2020). Personal disclosures of harassment, violence, and discrimination become politicized when they appear alongside similar accounts from other women (Mendes et al., 2019). Digital feminism also includes blogs, feminist pages and groups, awareness campaigns, podcasts, and creative content that challenges dominant gender norms (Shaw, 2012; Clark-Parsons, 2022). Online platforms are therefore tools of collective mobilisation as well as spaces for building and consolidating feminist communities.

Scholars hold differing opinions about the merits of these practices. Optimistic accounts highlight the speed, scale, and low cost of online mobilization, as well as its capacity to give a voice to marginalised communities and bypass media gatekeepers (Jackson et al., 2020). Critics, however, argue that networked movements can organize quickly but struggle to build the organizational depth needed for sustained political change (Tufekci, 2017). Others situate digital feminism within commercial platform economies that reward visibility, personal branding, and convenient messages. In this context, a form of “popular feminism” emerges that emphasizes self-confidence and individual expression over structural critique (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As feminist

messages gain visibility, they also provoke organized backlash, so that feminist and anti-feminist discourses circulate in parallel (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jane, 2017).

Digital feminism is not a single movement but many. It includes liberal and rights-based feminisms as well as religiously grounded, socialist, and intersectional perspectives (Clark-Parsons, 2022). Women in the developing world do not simply adopt feminist discourses produced elsewhere; they interpret them and, where appropriate, disagree with them in light of local values, priorities, and risks (Author, Year). A key limitation of existing scholarship is its focus on prominent campaigns, which often fails to reflect what digital feminism means for women whose online lives are less visible.

2.2. Women's Empowerment in Developing Societies

The concept of empowerment is much debated in gender and development scholarship. Kabeer's influential framework defines empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied to them. It has three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999). Resources include material, human, and social resources. Agency is the ability to define goals and act on them. Achievements refer to outcomes in well-being and status. This framework has since been extended to include voice, decision-making, freedom of mobility, bodily safety, education, earnings, and participation in public and political life (Kabeer, 2005; Cornwall, 2016). Empowerment is therefore a multifaceted process rather than a single event.

Feminist scholars have also warned against the depoliticization of empowerment in development discourse. Batliwala (2007) argues that a concept that originated in grassroots struggles to change unequal power relations was increasingly used by development agencies in ways that stripped it of its political character. In this narrower sense, empowerment becomes a "programme output," such as loans issued or trainings provided, without any change in the structures that produce women's subordination (Cornwall, 2016). This critique applies directly to debates about technology. Ownership of a mobile phone or creation of a social media account is sometimes treated as evidence of women's empowerment in itself (Author, Year). Such equivalences confuse access to a resource with the ability to use it to expand meaningful choice. Following Kabeer (1999), this study treats digital technology as a potential resource whose empowering effects depend on the agency it enables and the outcomes it produces.

The experience of empowerment needs to be understood in the context of local family, religious, class, and cultural environments. Rowlands (1997) distinguishes between "power within," "power to," and "power with," highlighting the psychological, practical, and collective dimensions of empowerment as experienced within specific social relationships. Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of "bargaining with patriarchy" suggests that women frequently gain security and advancement through strategies that operate within the limits of the gender system rather than challenging it directly. Mahmood (2005) further questions the assumption that agency must always take the form of resistance to norms, arguing that it can also be expressed through commitment to valued norms. These perspectives warn against universal and externally imposed definitions of empowerment. They also suggest that women's empowerment in developing societies should be understood in relation to women's own values, constraints, and aspirations.

2.3. Digital Platforms and Women's Agency

Digital platforms can enhance women's agency in a number of ways. Social media and messaging platforms provide access to information, peer networks, and social support that may be harder to reach offline, particularly for women with restricted mobility (Arora, 2019). Through formal and informal online learning resources, such as video tutorials and online courses, women can learn and gain skills without the costs and distance of institutional education (Author, Year). ICT4D research has long argued that information and communication technologies can widen women's choices when they are embedded in supportive social conditions (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006; Buskens & Webb, 2009).

Digital entrepreneurship has received particular attention. Women can run home-based businesses selling clothes, food, cosmetics, handicrafts, and services through social media, messaging-based markets, and e-commerce sites (Author, Year). Such businesses allow women to participate in market activities while respecting norms that limit their movement in public markets, and they may promote women's financial independence and bargaining power within the household (Author, Year). Some important studies, however, note that earnings are often small and irregular. Women may still depend on male family members for capital, delivery, or banking, and online business can add to their domestic burden (Author, Year).

Digital participation can also help women make their voices visible. Historically, marginalised groups have established their own discursive spaces outside the dominant public sphere, in which they can develop their identities, interests, and claims. Fraser's (1990) concept of "subaltern counterpublics" is useful for understanding how such spaces are constructed. Women-only groups, feminist pages, and online communities can function as counterpublics that allow women to discuss injustices and test new ideas before taking them into wider public debate (Mendes et al., 2019). Women who are excluded from formal politics

may also engage in online civic participation, such as commenting on public issues, signing petitions, and supporting campaigns (Author, Year). Most of this literature, however, concentrates on the potential of these platforms and says little about how this potential is realised and negotiated by women in particular social contexts. This is where interview-based research can help.

2.4. Digital Divides and Structural Inequalities

Although digital platforms hold promise, gender digital divides continue to exist in many developing societies. Reports from international organisations show that women in low- and middle-income countries are less likely than men to own a mobile phone or use mobile internet (GSMA, 2024). While earlier studies focused on physical access, more recent research shows that the digital divide also operates at the levels of skills, uses, and outcomes (Hargittai, 2002; van Dijk, 2020). Even women who have access may be unable to use technology to their benefit because of limited digital literacy, confidence, or autonomy.

Multiple overlapping factors affect women's digital access. Device ownership and affordability are major challenges, as the cost of handsets and data may be prohibitive for women without their own income (GSMA, 2024). Unreliable connectivity and electricity shortages particularly affect low-income and rural communities. Gaps in education and digital skills limit women's knowledge of how to use platforms, adjust privacy settings, and assess the reliability of information (Author, Year). Family approval is another gendered factor: in many households, women may use phones and the internet only with the permission of their husbands, fathers, or in-laws, and devices may be shared or monitored (Sambasivan et al., 2018).

These barriers do not affect all women to the same extent. Patterns of access and exclusion are shaped by the interplay of rural–urban differences, poverty, disability, age, and education (Author, Year). Older women, women with disabilities, and women in poor rural households may face compounded disadvantages that are not reflected in aggregate data. Critical ICT4D scholarship suggests that technology amplifies existing human and institutional capacities rather than replacing them (Toyama, 2015). Gender inequalities can thus be reproduced and even exacerbated by digital opportunities, as those with the highest levels of education, income, and social and family support are most likely to benefit (Kleine, 2013; Toyama, 2015).

2.5. Online Risks, Patriarchal Control, and Safety

Digital participation offers opportunities but also carries significant risks for women. Research documents various forms of technology-facilitated abuse, including cyber harassment, stalking, image-based sexual abuse, trolling, doxxing, privacy violations, and misinformation about women (Citron, 2014; Henry & Powell, 2015; Jane, 2017). Women who speak out against sexism are often targeted with sexualised and misogynist abuse intended to silence them (Megarry, 2014; Jane, 2017). Such abuse is not simply an isolated individual experience; it is a form of social control over women's presence in digital public spaces.

In developing societies, these risks are aggravated by norms of honour and reputation. Studies in South Asia show that online abuse can have offline consequences for women, including damage to family reputation, restrictions on mobility, and threats to personal safety (Sambasivan et al., 2019). Some women do not report abuse because they fear that their families may confiscate their phones or restrict their internet use. This creates a double bind in which the response to harassment is further control (Sambasivan et al., 2019). Women are also under constant surveillance: family members, partners, and communities may monitor women's online activities, while state actors and platforms collect and monitor data in ways that may affect women's privacy and freedom of expression (Author, Year).

Women respond to these risks with a range of protective behaviours. Studies report self-censorship, restricted posting, the use of pseudonyms, private or locked accounts, and deactivation of or complete withdrawal from platforms or online spaces (Megarry, 2014; Sambasivan et al., 2018). These responses help keep women safe from harm, but they also restrict women's participation and perpetuate their marginalisation from digital public life. The literature therefore treats safety as inseparable from empowerment: risk and empowerment are intertwined, and the burden of managing risk falls disproportionately on women.

2.6. Resistance, Negotiation, and Everyday Digital Feminism

Women are not merely passive objects of control. A growing body of research highlights the innovative and strategic ways in which women use digital tools to negotiate constraints. These include private and women-only groups, coded language, separate accounts for different audiences, selective sharing, and community networks that provide protection and support (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Sambasivan et al., 2018). Digital entrepreneurship can also serve as a negotiation strategy, because it allows women to pursue economic goals in ways that their families and communities find acceptable (Kandiyoti, 1988).

These practices require a distinction between visible activism and quieter forms of resistance. Scott's (1985) concept of “everyday resistance” draws attention to subtle, low-profile acts through which subordinate groups contest power without open confrontation. In the digital sphere, such resistance can be seen when women privately share feminist content, quietly follow

women's rights pages, or use the internet to learn about their rights. These acts may not register as activism, but they can still change women's awareness and choices. However, as Abu-Lughod (1990) cautions, there is a danger of romanticizing resistance. She argues that resistance should be read as a diagnostic of power, revealing the structures women must negotiate, rather than as evidence of freedom.

Thus, the literature suggests that women's agency in digital spaces is partial, contextual, and negotiated rather than absolute. Women may exercise considerable autonomy in some areas, such as learning and earning, while their autonomy remains limited in others, such as public expression or interaction with strangers (Author, Year). Agency may also change over time as women build trust with their families, learn new skills, or encounter new risks. Capturing agency as negotiated requires research methods that can grasp nuance, contradiction, and context, which survey-based methods often struggle to do.

3. Theoretical Framework

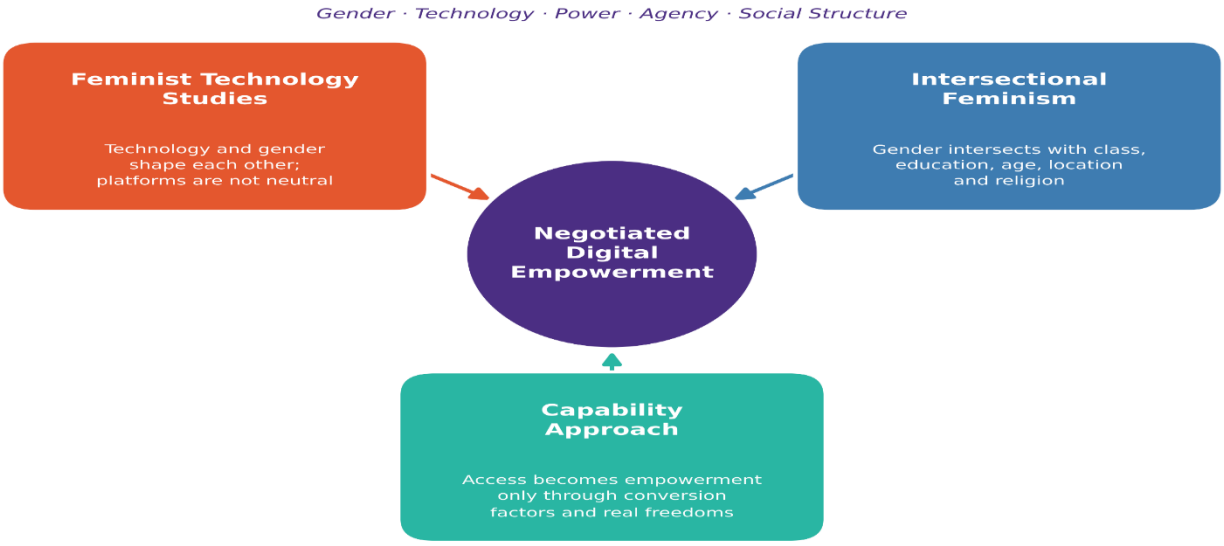
This study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks: feminist technology studies, intersectional feminism, and the capability approach.

Feminist technology studies suggest that gender and technology shape each other. Technologies are neither neutral tools nor determinants of social outcomes; they are designed, used, and given meaning within gendered social relations (Wajcman, 2004). Haraway's (1991) work also challenged rigid boundaries between humans and technology and opened space for imagining technology as a site of feminist possibility. This perspective allows the study to avoid both techno-optimism and techno-pessimism and to focus on how women use and make sense of digital platforms within their social contexts.

Crenshaw (1989, 1991) developed intersectional feminism to explain how race and gender combine to produce distinct forms of disadvantage. Building on this approach, the study explores how gender intersects with class, education, age, location, religion, and disability. Mohanty's (1988) critique of the homogenizing representation of “Third World women” in Western feminist scholarship is also relevant here. An intersectional lens enables the study to consider how different women experience digital opportunities and risks differently.

The capability approach, developed by Sen (1999) and elaborated by Nussbaum (2000), evaluates development in terms of people's real freedoms to achieve functionings they have reason to value. It emphasizes that resources, such as a mobile phone or internet connection, do not automatically translate into capabilities. Their conversion depends on personal, social, and environmental “conversion factors.” ICT4D researchers have used this approach to show how social norms, skills, and institutional conditions mediate the relationship between technology and well-being (Zheng, 2009; Kleine, 2013). The capability approach is thus a useful tool for analysing why digital access alone is not enough to achieve empowerment.

Together, these perspectives offer a relational, situated, and negotiated conception of digital empowerment: technology shapes and is shaped by gendered power relations, operates across intersecting inequalities, and becomes empowering only when certain social conditions are met. Because these processes are tied to meaning, experience, and context, a qualitative interpretive approach is appropriate. In-depth interviews allow women to describe, in their own words, their practices and experiences with digital platforms, the limitations they face, and their experiences of empowerment. Standardized surveys are limited in their ability to capture such data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

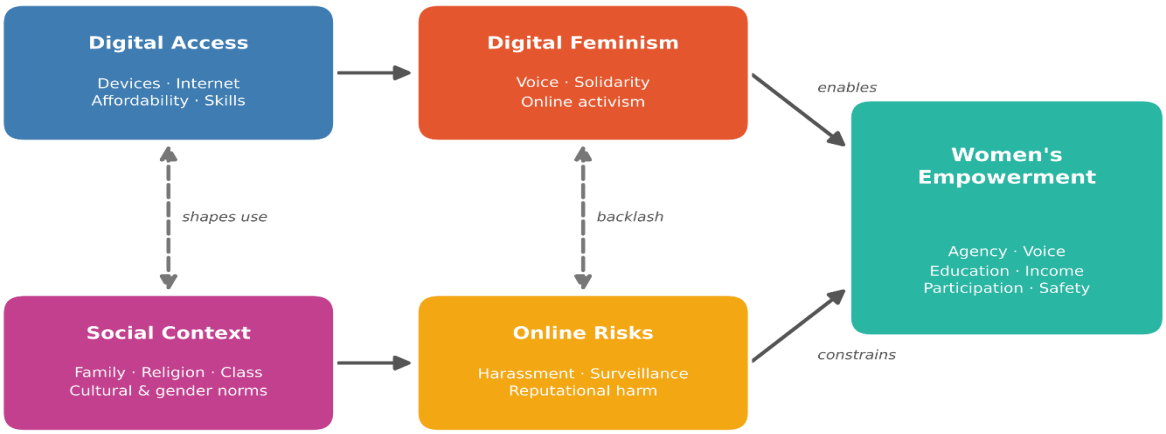


3.1. Research Gap

This review reveals a significant and expanding body of research on digital feminism, women's empowerment, and gender and technology, as well as important gaps in this scholarship. First, research on digital feminism has focused largely on high-profile hashtag campaigns, online activism, and urban, educated, often English-speaking women, frequently in Global North contexts (Jackson et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2019). Second, much ICT4D and policy literature measures women's access to and use of technology without exploring the meanings women attach to their digital practices or the negotiations they undertake within families and communities (Author, Year). Third, studies of online harassment and digital inequality often treat women mainly as victims or excluded groups, paying less attention to how women respond to constraints and exercise agency (Author, Year). Few studies bring these strands together to investigate how ordinary women experience digital feminism and empowerment in their everyday lives.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the lived experiences of digital feminism and empowerment among women in [insert selected developing society/community]. It uses a qualitative interpretive methodology and in-depth interviews with women from different educational, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It aims to capture how women understand digital feminism, how digital platforms support or hinder their empowerment, what factors affect their participation, and how they manage risk and negotiate social norms.

This literature review is closely related to the study's research questions. The first question, on how women understand and interpret digital feminism in their own lives, draws on debates about the meaning and diversity of digital feminism. The second question, on how digital platforms enable or limit women's voice, agency, and participation, is informed by scholarship on empowerment and on digital platforms as sources of agency. The third question, on barriers to women's access and use, builds on research on digital divides and structural inequalities. The fourth question, on women's experiences of and responses to harassment, surveillance, and moral policing, is based on the literature on online risks, patriarchal control, and safety. The fifth question, on the strategies women use to negotiate patriarchal norms and assert agency in the digital sphere, draws on work on resistance, negotiation, and everyday agency, as well as on the theoretical framework. The literature review therefore provides both the conceptual foundation and the analytical framework for the empirical investigation.



4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Philosophy and Approach

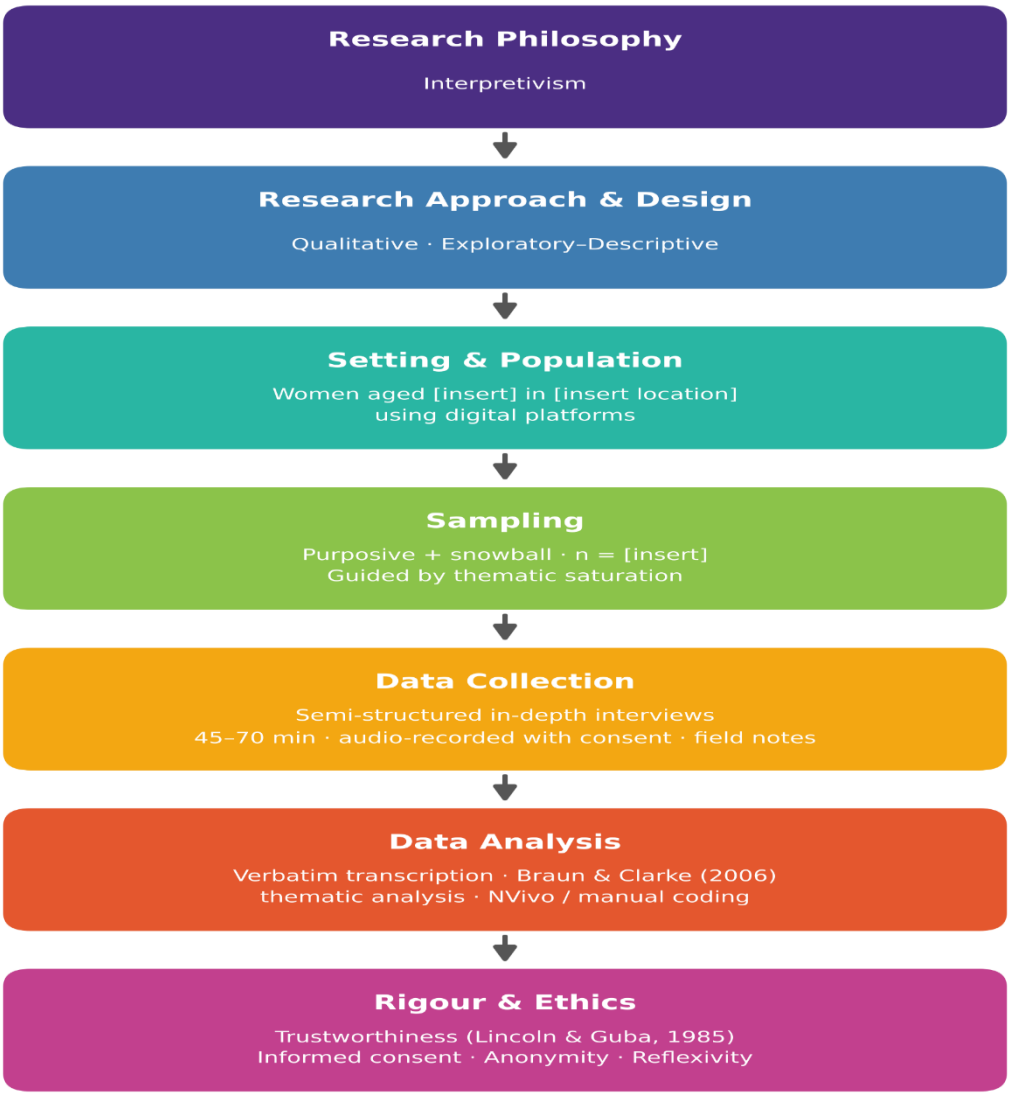
This research adopts an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism holds that there is no single objective social reality waiting to be measured; rather, social reality is constructed by people through their experiences, interactions, and interpretations of events (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Digital feminism and women's empowerment are not fixed conditions that can be observed directly. Women understand them, negotiate them, and experience them differently according to their social roles and daily lives. An interpretivist philosophy is therefore suitable for a study that seeks to understand the meanings and lived realities of digital feminism for women, rather than to test hypotheses, establish causal relationships, or make predictions.

In line with this philosophy, the study adopts a qualitative approach. As Patton (2015) notes, qualitative inquiry is suited to research that asks "how" and "why" questions about complex social processes shaped by context, power relations, and personal interpretation. The study's research questions concern how women interpret digital feminism, how they think digital platforms support or constrain their empowerment, and how they respond to online risks and social restrictions. Answering these questions requires rich and detailed narratives in participants' own words. A qualitative methodology can capture the nuances, ambivalences, and contradictions that are part of women's digital lives, which standardised measurement may flatten or overlook.

4.2. Research Design

The study uses a qualitative exploratory and descriptive design. The exploratory dimension reflects the limited empirical attention given to ordinary women's everyday experiences of digital feminism in developing societies, beyond the spotlight of mainstream online campaigns. The descriptive dimension aims to provide a detailed account of how women use digital platforms, what barriers they face, what strategies they use to overcome those barriers, and how they experience empowerment through their use of these platforms.

This design facilitates in-depth consideration of women's experiences, constraints, strategies, and interpretations, which may be personal, sensitive, and context-specific. A survey design could identify patterns of platform use or attitudes across a larger population, but it could not capture the meanings women give to their internet use or the negotiations they undertake within their families and communities. An experimental design would be unsuitable and ethically inappropriate, because these phenomena cannot be manipulated or separated from their social context. For these reasons, a qualitative exploratory and descriptive design is the most appropriate for the research questions.



4.3. Research Setting and Population

The study will take place in [insert city, district, province, or community]. This setting was chosen because [insert brief reason, e.g., increasing mobile internet use, a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, or accessibility to the researcher]. The target population is women aged [insert age range] who actively or occasionally use digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), or online marketplaces.

Where possible, participants will be recruited from a variety of educational, occupational, marital, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This diversity is intended to reflect a range of experiences rather than to produce a statistically representative sample. Including women with diverse education, employment, marital status, household structure, and economic status will allow the study to explore how social factors interact to shape women's digital access, participation, and lived experiences of empowerment.

4.4. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling will be used to select information-rich participants who can speak meaningfully about the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). Participants will be chosen for their experience with digital platforms and their ability to reflect on empowerment, participation, restrictions, and online safety. Initial participants will be recruited through [insert recruitment channels, e.g., community groups, women's groups, educational institutions, or professional networks].

Snowball sampling will then be used, with great care, to recruit additional participants through trusted referrals. This approach can help to reach women who might be reluctant to discuss sensitive issues, such as internet access, family restrictions, or online harassment, with a stranger. To reduce the risk of a homogeneous sample, the researcher will monitor the diversity of referrals and actively recruit participants from under-represented groups. Referring participants will not be told whether the women they referred agreed to take part, which will protect confidentiality.

The study will include approximately [insert number, e.g., 20–30] participants. This sample size is justified by the principle of thematic saturation, the depth of the interviews, and the exploratory nature of the study (Guest et al., 2006). Data collection will continue until saturation is reached, that is, until further interviews yield little or no new analytical information relevant to the research questions. The final number of participants will also be guided by the concept of information power, which holds that fewer participants may be needed when the sample is highly relevant, the aim is focused, and the dialogue is rich (Malterud et al., 2016).

Participants will be adult women who use one or more digital platforms, give informed consent, and are willing to discuss their experiences of empowerment, online participation, constraints, and safety. Individuals who are under 18 years of age, unwilling to participate, unable to give informed consent, or lacking experience with digital platforms will be excluded.

4.5. Data-Collection Methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be used to gather primary data. This approach combines a core set of questions with the flexibility to follow participants' priorities, explore unexpected topics, and ask follow-up questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is suited to the study's purpose of investigating personal and context-dependent experiences.

Interviews will be conducted in person or online, depending on each participant's availability, preference, and safety. Face-to-face interviews can help to build rapport and allow the researcher to observe non-verbal cues. Participants with limited mobility, time constraints, or concerns about meeting the researcher in person may choose an online interview through a platform such as Zoom, Google Meet, or WhatsApp video. Participants will be encouraged to choose a time and place where they feel able to speak privately. This is particularly important where family members may be monitoring them.

Each interview will last approximately 45–70 minutes and will be conducted in [insert language(s), e.g., Urdu, English, or a regional language], according to the participant's preference. Interviews will be audio-recorded only if the participant agrees. If a participant declines to be recorded, the researcher will take detailed handwritten notes during and immediately after the interview. The researcher will also keep field notes recording non-verbal behaviour, contextual information, interruptions, and personal reflections on each interview.

Before the main data collection, the interview guide will be pilot-tested with 2–3 participants who meet the inclusion criteria. The pilot will assess the clarity, sequencing, cultural appropriateness, and sensitivity of the questions, and the guide will be revised if necessary. Data from pilot interviews will not be included in the final analysis unless the guide remains substantially unchanged and the participants consent to their inclusion.

4.6. Interview Guide

The following open-ended questions will form the basis of the interview guide. Follow-up questions and probes may be added as necessary to encourage elaboration.

- How do you use digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram in your daily life?
- When and how did you start using the internet and social media, and how has your use changed over time?
- What does the word “feminism” mean to you, and where did you first come across feminist ideas?
- Have you seen or taken part in discussions about women's rights or issues online? Can you share an example?
- In what ways, if any, has using digital platforms made you feel more confident, informed, or independent?
- Has online participation helped you in education, work, business, or building networks? Please describe your experience.
- How do your family members feel about your use of the internet and social media?
- Are there community, religious, or cultural expectations that influence what you can say or do online? How do you respond to them?
- Do you have your own phone or device? Who else uses or checks it, and how does this affect your online activity?
- What difficulties have you faced in accessing or using the internet, such as cost, connectivity, electricity, or digital skills?
- Have you or women you know faced harassment, unwanted contact, or misuse of personal information online? How was it handled?
- Are there things you avoid posting or saying online? What makes you decide to stay silent or limit what you share?
- What steps do you take to protect your privacy, reputation, or safety online, for example, private accounts, pseudonyms, or closed groups?
- Has your online participation changed your role in decision-making at home or in your community? Please explain.
- What changes would make digital spaces safer, fairer, and more useful for women like you?

4.7. Data-Analysis Procedure

All audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in languages other than English will be transcribed in the original language and then translated into English. Selected transcripts will be back-translated or checked by a bilingual reviewer to ensure that meaning is preserved. Transcripts will be anonymised at the transcription stage.

The data will be analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases. In the first phase, familiarization, the researcher will read and re-read the transcripts and field notes and record initial impressions. In the second phase, initial codes will be generated systematically across the entire dataset by identifying meanings relevant to the research questions. In the third phase, codes will be combined into candidate themes by searching for broader patterns of meaning. In the fourth phase, the themes will be checked against the coded extracts and the whole dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. In the fifth phase, the themes will be named and defined, and their scope and central idea will be clarified. In the sixth phase, the report will be produced, combining an analytic narrative with participant quotations and linking the findings to the research questions and the literature (Nawaz & Iqbal, 2025).

Both inductive and deductive coding will be used as appropriate. Inductive coding will allow themes to emerge from participants' accounts. Deductive coding, based on feminist technology studies, intersectional feminism, and the capability approach, will link the data to the study's theoretical framework. Coding will be conducted manually or with software (e.g., NVivo, MAXQDA, or Atlas.ti), depending on the size of the dataset and the resources available.

Several practices will strengthen the analysis. The researcher will write analytic memos throughout the process to record ideas, coding decisions, and questions. Codes and themes will be refined through constant comparison across participants and data segments. Peer debriefing with [insert supervisor/colleague] will provide important feedback on the emerging coding framework and themes.

4.8. Trustworthiness and Rigour

The trustworthiness of the study will be ensured using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility will be established through prolonged engagement with participants and the data and through member checking, in which selected participants will be asked to confirm that summaries of their interviews or the initial themes accurately reflect their views. Transferability will be supported by thick description of the research setting, participant characteristics, and context, so that readers can judge whether the findings may apply to other settings. Dependability will be ensured through a full audit trail, including the interview guide, coding framework, memos, and documentation of analytic decisions, which will be reviewed regularly by [insert name or title of supervisor]. Confirmability will be supported through reflexivity, triangulation across interview data, field notes, and memos, and transparent documentation of methodological and analytical decisions (Nowell et al., 2017).

4.9. Ethical Considerations

Before data collection begins, ethical approval will be sought from the [insert name of institutional review board or ethics committee] of [insert university]. Participation will be voluntary. Before each interview, participants will receive an information sheet in their own language explaining the purpose of the study, its procedures, potential risks and benefits, the recording of responses, and how the data will be used, stored, and published. Written or verbal informed consent will be obtained and documented. Participants will be informed that they may refuse to answer any question, take a break, end the interview, or withdraw from the study without giving reasons and without any consequences.

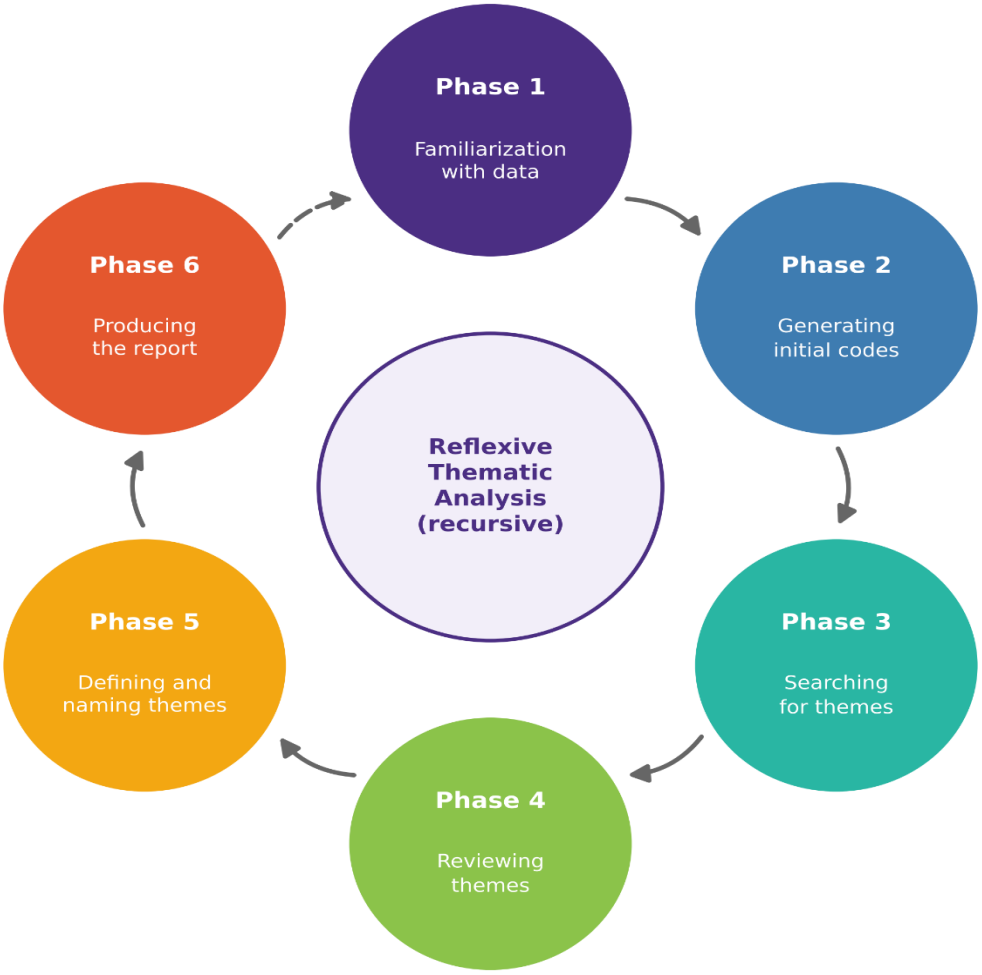
Anonymity and confidentiality will be protected throughout the study. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym, and all identifying information, such as names, locations, workplaces, platform usernames, and distinctive personal circumstances, will be removed or anonymised in transcripts and publications. Audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms will be stored securely on password-protected and encrypted devices and will be accessible only to the research team. The data will be retained for [insert period] and then securely destroyed in accordance with institutional policy.

Because the study may involve sensitive experiences, such as online harassment, family restrictions, and threats to reputation, special care will be taken in handling these topics. The researcher will watch for signs of distress, allow participants to decide how much to share, and pause or end the interview if needed. Participants will be given information about relevant support services, such as [insert local helplines/support organisations]. Participants' safety will be the primary consideration, and arrangements will be made to protect it, including private interview settings and secure communication channels.

4.10. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher recognizes that their gender, social status, education, culture, and assumptions may influence participants' responses as well as the interpretation of the data. These factors could affect rapport, power dynamics in interviews, and the researcher's sensitivity to particular issues.

Reflexivity will be maintained throughout the research process to manage these influences. The researcher will keep a reflexive journal and analytic memos recording personal reactions, tacit assumptions, and possible biases at each stage of data collection and analysis. Regular supervision and peer debriefing will provide opportunities to question interpretations and explore alternative readings of the data. The researcher's positionality and methodology will be clearly explained in the final article so that readers can take into account its possible influence on the findings.



5. Findings

5.1. Theme 1: Digital Voice, Visibility, and Collective Solidarity

This theme captures the ways in which digital platforms gave participants a space to share their views and experiences and to connect with other women. For women whose mobility was restricted or whose use of public spaces was limited by social norms, posting, commenting, or speaking up in family and community groups was a new way of expressing themselves. Women-only groups and closed online communities offered emotional support, practical advice, and a sense of belonging. They also provided a relatively safe space for discussing problems with spouses, health, and harassment. Learning that other women faced similar problems helped some participants see their difficulties not as personal failings but as structural problems. For a few participants, this awareness led to collective action, such as supporting campaigns or mentoring other women. Many participants, however, were unsure about the label "feminist," while still endorsing principles of dignity, education, and fairness for women. Online solidarity was not free of conflict: class differences, differences in religious belief, and differing opinions also surfaced within women's groups.

"Before, nobody listened to me. Now when I post something on Facebook, people respond; some agree and some argue, but at least they are listening." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

"Reading other women's stories made me realize that this is not just my problem; it is how the system works." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

"I don't call myself a feminist, but I believe a woman should have the right to study and work." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

Interpretation: Digital platforms can act as small-scale counterpublics in which women's voices can be heard (Fraser, 1990). They can also support a shift from "power within" to "power with" (Rowlands, 1997). Participants' ambivalence toward the label "feminist" reflects the localised and contested nature of feminist identity in developing societies (Mohanty, 1988).

5.2. Theme 2: Education, Skill Development, and Economic Empowerment

This theme concerns participants' use of digital platforms for learning and livelihood. Through online videos, WhatsApp study groups, and online courses, participants gained knowledge and skills that would otherwise have been unavailable to them because of cost, distance, or limited access. These included languages, sewing, digital marketing, and information on legal rights and health. Digital skills were often learned informally from siblings, children, and friends. Participants who sold clothes, food, cosmetics, or tutoring services online described digital entrepreneurship as an alternative to participating in public markets. This gave them a degree of economic independence and self-confidence. The gains, however, had clear limits: earnings were modest and irregular, some women depended on male relatives for deliveries and payments, and business was intertwined with domestic work. Income was often described as "helping the family" rather than as a means of gaining independence.

"I learned stitching designs and how to use Canva from YouTube. Nobody taught me; I watched again and again." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

"I sell suits through Instagram and WhatsApp. It's not a lot of money, but now I don't have to ask my husband for everything." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

"My brother collects the payments and handles the courier, so I still depend on him." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

Interpretation: Information, skills, and income are crucial resource dimensions of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Digital entrepreneurship may enhance women's economic agency while accommodating prevailing gender norms, a strategy that can be described as "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988). Continued reliance on male intermediaries, however, limits how far these gains translate into autonomy.

5.3. Theme 3: Negotiating Family Expectations and Patriarchal Norms

This theme concerns how participants' digital lives were shaped by family members. Parents, husbands, in-laws, and brothers often influenced which platforms women could use, when and how they used them, and with whom they could interact. Restrictions were frequently justified with reference to honour, reputation, morality, or safety. Participants reported a range of responses, including compliance, gradual persuasion, building trust over time, and occasionally concealing their online activity. Some reported that family attitudes became more liberal once the internet brought visible benefits, such as income or help with children's studies. Family was thus both a source of control and a potential source of support and legitimation.

"My husband said Facebook was a waste and not safe. He only allowed it after I showed him I was earning from it." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

"My father checks who I talk to. I understand he worries, but it makes me feel like a child." (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

Interpretation: These accounts reveal that digital empowerment is relational and negotiated within household power relations (Kabeer, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1988). Families can restrict women's access, but they can also give it legitimacy.

5.4. Theme 4: Online Harassment, Surveillance, and Digital Inequality

This theme brings together the risks and structural barriers that shaped participants' online participation. Participants described unwanted messages, sexualised comments, fake accounts, threats to share images, and misuse of personal

information. Harassment was often treated as a normal part of being a woman online, something to be managed rather than reported. Fear of reputational damage was strong, as was the concern that telling family members could lead to losing phone access. Surveillance by relatives and community members added to these pressures, and low trust in platform and legal reporting mechanisms discouraged formal complaints.

Participation was further shaped by structural inequalities: the cost of devices and data, unreliable connectivity, electricity shortages, shared household phones, and limited digital literacy. Women with lower education or income, older women, rural women, and those whose phones were controlled by male relatives appeared to face greater barriers.

“If someone sends bad messages, I just block them. If I tell my family, they will take my phone.” (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

“One picture can destroy a girl's name here, so we are always careful.” (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

“We have one phone at home. When my husband is out, I cannot use it.” (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

Interpretation: Online harassment and family control appear to reinforce each other, a pattern also documented in South Asian research (Sambasivan et al., 2019). The gender digital divide involves inequalities in ownership, skills, and autonomy as well as access, and these intersect with class, education, and location (van Dijk, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991).

5.5. Theme 5: Strategic Participation and the Limits of Digital Empowerment

This theme captures how participants managed risk while recognizing the limits of what digital participation could achieve. Common strategies included private accounts, pseudonyms, avatars instead of personal photos, closed groups, separate accounts for different audiences, coded language, and quiet engagement with feminist content through reading or private sharing rather than public endorsement. Many participants also practised self-censorship on topics such as religion, politics, and family matters. They framed these tactics as ways of continuing to participate on their own terms.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that online gains did not automatically carry over into offline life. Women could feel confident online while still facing restrictions on mobility and decision-making at home. Their online income, voice, and networks also remained fragile and could be lost if a device was taken away or family attitudes changed.

“I have one account for my family and one for myself. On my own account, I can follow pages about women's rights.” (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

“Online I can say anything, but at home the decisions are still made by others.” (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

“The phone gives some freedom, but it can be taken away any day.” (Participant [X], [age], [occupation])

Illustrative quotation based on the proposed theme; replace with actual interview data.

Interpretation: These practices reflect everyday forms of resistance (Scott, 1985) and contextual privacy management (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Their fragility supports the view that technology amplifies existing structures rather than transforming them on its own (Toyama, 2015; Cornwall, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This study explored women's lived experiences of digital feminism and empowerment in [insert developing society/community]. Using a qualitative interpretive design and semi-structured interviews with [insert number] women, it examined how women use, interpret, and negotiate digital platforms in their everyday lives, and how these practices relate to broader processes of empowerment shaped by family, community, and structural conditions.

6.1. Summary of Main Findings

The findings suggest that digital platforms can support women's voice, visibility, education, peer support, entrepreneurship, and civic participation. For many participants, online spaces offered opportunities to express opinions, learn new skills, access information about their rights, build supportive networks, and earn income from home. These gains were often modest and everyday rather than dramatic or public, but participants described them as meaningful in their own lives.

At the same time, empowerment through digital means was neither automatic nor equally distributed. Women's ability to benefit from digital participation was shaped by device ownership, affordability, connectivity, digital literacy, family expectations, safety risks, class, education, and patriarchal norms. Women with fewer resources or more restrictive households appeared less able to convert digital access into meaningful outcomes. Online gains were also fragile and could be lost through device confiscation, harassment, or changes in family attitudes.

The study further shows that women actively negotiate these constraints. Selective participation, privacy settings, pseudonyms, private groups, separate accounts, and careful self-presentation allowed many participants to continue taking part online while managing risk. Digital feminism helped build solidarity and, for some, a growing awareness of gender injustice as shared and structural. However, online harassment, surveillance, and the threat of reputational harm limited women's freedom and confidence, and much of the burden of staying safe fell on women themselves.

6.2. Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to the understanding of digital feminism in developing societies by shifting attention from high-profile campaigns and organized activism to the everyday digital practices of ordinary women. It shows that digital feminism in these contexts often takes quiet, cautious, and context-sensitive forms that may not be visible in public online debate but still matter for women's sense of self and possibility.

The study also supports an understanding of empowerment as relational, contextual, and negotiated, rather than simply a matter of individual access to technology. A mobile phone or social media account is at most a potential resource; whether it becomes empowering depends on the social relations, norms, and structural conditions within which women live. Intersectional and feminist perspectives are valuable in this regard because they reveal how gender interacts with class, education, age, location, and household position to produce unequal digital experiences, and they caution against treating women in developing societies as a single, uniform group.

6.3. Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications. Governments and policymakers should prioritise affordable internet access and devices, invest in digital literacy programmes designed around women's needs, develop women-friendly public digital infrastructure such as safe community access points, and strengthen legal and institutional responses to cyber-harassment so that reporting is accessible, trusted, and does not expose women to further harm.

Educational institutions can integrate digital literacy and online safety into curricula for girls and women, covering privacy management, information evaluation, and responses to abuse, alongside women's leadership training that builds confidence in using digital platforms for learning, work, and civic participation.

Civil society organizations can run awareness campaigns that address both women's digital rights and community attitudes, provide legal support and counselling for women facing online abuse, and deliver community-based digital-safety programmes that reach women excluded from formal education or employment.

Digital platforms bear responsibility for creating safer online environments. Stronger and more responsive reporting systems, clearer privacy controls, safety resources in local languages, and effective, context-aware content moderation could reduce the risks women face. Platform design should also take into account the shared and supervised device use common in many developing contexts.

Families and communities play a decisive role in shaping women's digital lives. Supportive environments that respect women's privacy, education, mobility, and online participation can help ensure that digital access translates into real opportunity, rather than leaving women's participation dependent on surveillance and permission.

7. Limitations

The study has several limitations. As a qualitative study based on a limited number of participants in a specific context, its findings cannot be statistically generalized to all women in developing societies; instead, they offer an in-depth understanding that may be transferable to similar settings. The data rely on participants' self-reports, which may be shaped by recall, social

desirability, or reluctance to disclose sensitive experiences such as harassment or family conflict. In addition, digital platforms, their features, and their governance change rapidly, so some of the practices and risks described here may change over time.

8. Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend this study in several directions. Further qualitative work is needed with rural and low-income women, whose digital experiences may differ substantially from those of urban or more advantaged women. Studies focusing on older women and women with disabilities would help address groups often overlooked in research on gender and technology. Research on men's and family members' perceptions of women's digital participation could clarify the household dynamics that enable or restrict women's access. More attention is also needed to online feminist activism and its links to women's political participation, as well as to platform governance, algorithmic bias, and online safety. Finally, comparative qualitative studies across developing societies would help show how cultural, economic, and policy contexts shape the meanings and outcomes of digital feminism.

In conclusion, digital feminism is reshaping the landscape of women's empowerment in developing societies, though not in a simple or linear way. Digital platforms open real possibilities, but realizing them depends on addressing the social, economic, and structural conditions in which women's digital lives unfold.

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