

# Invisible Firewalls: Gendered Exclusion and Resistance in The Digital Public Sphere

<sup>1</sup>Mahera Imam, <sup>2</sup>Prof N. Manimekalai, <sup>3</sup>Prof S. Suba

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Women's Studies, Khajamalai Campus, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu-620023.

<sup>2</sup>Director, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi

<sup>3</sup>Professor, Department of Women's Studies, Khajamalai Campus, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli- 620023.

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## ABSTRACT

The digital public sphere, often envisioned as an egalitarian space for dialogue and democratic engagement, is increasingly shaped by structures of exclusion that mirror and reinforce offline inequalities. This paper critically examines the concept of invisible firewalls a metaphor for the socio-technical, algorithmic, and cultural barriers that inhibit the equitable participation of women and gender-diverse individuals in online environments. While digital technologies promise universality, access, and empowerment, in practice they often produce and perpetuate stratified forms of visibility, voice, and vulnerability. Drawing upon Nancy Fraser's reconceptualization of the public sphere and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this study explores how gendered subjectivities are regulated and marginalized through online surveillance, algorithmic governance, and socio-cultural gatekeeping. Platforms, despite their outward neutrality, are underpinned by biased data architectures, as articulated in Safiya Umoja Noble's Algorithms of Oppression and Virginia Eubanks' Automating Inequality, which disproportionately affect women, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.

Empirical data supports these concerns: the World Wide Web Foundation's 2020 Women's Rights Online report reveals that women are 21% less likely to be online than men in developing countries. Furthermore, UNESCO's 2021 findings on online violence against women journalists document that 73% had experienced online threats or abuse, indicating systemic vulnerabilities. In the Indian context, findings by the Internet Freedom Foundation and Equality Labs illustrate how caste, religion, and gender intersect to produce unique digital harms. This paper argues that exclusion in the digital realm is not merely a consequence of access disparity but a reflection of deeper epistemic and infrastructural biases. It also examines the diverse forms of resistance ranging from legal activism and digital literacy initiatives to the creation of feminist design frameworks that challenge these exclusions. The study proposes a critical digital justice approach, grounded in intersectionality and accountability, as essential to dismantling invisible firewalls and fostering inclusive digital citizenship. By foregrounding both systemic exclusion and modes of resistance, this paper contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of how gender operates in the digital public sphere, and calls for a reimagining of technological futures that centre equity, dignity, and agency.

**Keywords:** Digital Gender Divide, Digital Justice, Technology-Facilitated Violence, Intersectionality in Cyberspace, Algorithmic Bias and Exclusion

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview of the Digital Public Sphere

In the contemporary digital age, the public sphere has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from physical forums of debate and democratic discourse to virtual platforms mediated by technology. The digital

public sphere encompassing social media networks, online forums, content-sharing platforms, and news commentaries has emerged as a critical space for political engagement, social mobilization, and expression of dissent. With the proliferation of internet access and mobile technology, these virtual arenas promise broader participation and inclusivity across lines of geography, class, and identity. However, this idealized conception is increasingly problematized by growing evidence that digital spaces often reproduce, and in some cases intensify, the structural inequalities embedded in offline society. Access to and participation in the digital public sphere is deeply stratified along lines of gender, caste, class, race, and sexuality. Despite their outward openness, digital platforms frequently operate on logics that marginalize, silence, or surveil already vulnerable groups, thereby challenging the notion of the internet as an equalizing force.

### **Rationale for the Study: Why “Invisible Firewalls” Matter**

This paper introduces the metaphor of “invisible firewalls” to conceptualize the subtle yet powerful mechanisms that exclude women and gender-diverse individuals from full participation in the digital public sphere. These firewalls are not always legal or infrastructural; rather, they are often algorithmic, cultural, and epistemic difficult to detect yet profoundly impactful. They manifest in biased content moderation practices, unequal access to digital literacy, cyber violence, and the underrepresentation of marginalized voices in platform governance. Addressing these invisible barriers is critical for several reasons. First, digital participation increasingly translates into political visibility, economic opportunity, and access to rights. Second, the persistence of exclusion undermines democratic discourse and contributes to the erasure of intersectional perspectives in shaping public opinion. Third, unchecked digital harm, including online harassment and surveillance, reinforces patriarchal control and discourages marginalized groups especially women from occupying public digital space.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper employs a critical feminist and intersectional methodology that combines theoretical analysis with qualitative review of secondary data. Drawing on the works of Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, Safiya Umoja Noble, and Virginia Eubanks, the study conceptualizes invisible firewalls as socio-technical and cultural barriers to digital participation. It analyses global and Indian reports including those by the World Wide Web Foundation, UNESCO, Internet Freedom Foundation, and Equality Labs to explore how gender, caste, and religion shape digital exclusion. It maps resistance strategies such as feminist design, legal activism, and community-led digital literacy initiatives. The approach prioritizes epistemic depth over generalizability, aiming to critically interrogate digital inequalities and propose inclusive, justice-oriented futures.

### **Research Questions and Objectives**

This study seeks to interrogate the mechanisms and impacts of gendered exclusion in the digital public sphere and explore pathways of resistance and inclusion. It is guided by the following core questions:

#### **Research Questions**

How do “invisible firewalls” include algorithmic bias, socio-cultural constraints, and digital violence shape gendered exclusion in the digital public sphere?

In what ways are women and gender-diverse individuals resisting these exclusions, and what legal, technological, or community-based strategies are emerging to reclaim digital space?

#### **Objectives**

To critically analyse the structural and socio-technical barriers that produce gendered exclusion in digital platforms, and examine their impact on visibility, access, and participation.

To explore emerging frameworks, policies, and grassroots interventions that challenge digital inequalities and promote a more inclusive, feminist digital public sphere.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framing

This study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation to examine gendered exclusions in digital environments. At the core is Nancy Fraser's (1990) reconceptualization of the *public sphere* as a contested space shaped by power relations. Fraser critiques Jürgen Habermas's ideal of a rational, universal public sphere, arguing instead for the recognition of subaltern counter publics parallel discursive arenas where marginalized groups formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. This framework enables an analysis of how dominant digital discourses suppress or devalue marginalized voices. Judith Butler's (1993) theory of gender performativity further illuminates how gendered identities are constituted and regulated through repeated social practices including digital interactions. Online expressions of gender, sexuality, and dissent are thus sites of surveillance and discipline, particularly for those who deviate from normative expectations.

To interrogate the role of technology, this paper also incorporates Safiya Umoja Noble's concept of algorithmic oppression, which illustrates how search engines and digital platforms reinforce racial and gendered stereotypes. Virginia Eubanks adds a critical lens on how automated systems in welfare and policing disproportionately target low-income women and communities of colour, deepening structural marginalization under the guise of efficiency. Together, these scholars provide the conceptual tools to explore how gendered exclusions in the digital public sphere are not incidental but systematically embedded in the design, governance, and culture of digital technologies.

## Conceptual Foundations

### Reimagining the Public Sphere

The notion of the public sphere, as introduced by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), posits an idealized space where private individuals come together to engage in rational-critical debate and influence public opinion, separate from the state and the market. Habermas envisioned this sphere as a cornerstone of democratic deliberation a communicative arena where participants have equal access and the capacity to influence political processes through discourse. However, this model has been widely critiqued for its Eurocentric, masculinist, and exclusionary premises. Nancy Fraser (1990) famously challenged Habermas's account by highlighting how it presupposes a homogenous citizenry and ignores the ways in which structural inequalities particularly those of gender, race, and class have historically excluded certain groups from participation. Fraser introduces the concept of "subaltern counter publics" alternative discursive arenas where marginalized communities create and circulate oppositional interpretations of their identities and needs. Rather than one unified public sphere, Fraser argues for a plurality of publics that contest dominant narratives and seek recognition and redistribution. In the context of the digital age, this reimagining becomes vital. Although the internet is often seen as democratizing participation, the digital public sphere remains stratified, echoing Fraser's concerns. Platforms governed by opaque algorithms, gatekeeping content policies, and unequal access functionally marginalize voices from oppressed communities. Thus, applying Fraser's framework to the digital realm enables us to analyse not just who speaks, but who is heard, how participation is structured, and whose knowledge is legitimized in these virtual spaces.

### Gender, Power, and Digital Space

Digital technologies are not neutral tools they are imbued with power, shaped by the social and political contexts in which they are designed and used. Feminist theorists argue that digital subjectivity how individuals perform, experience, and negotiate identity online is deeply gendered, often reflecting and amplifying existing inequalities. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1993) is critical in understanding the gendered dynamics of online presence. According to Butler, gender is not a static identity but a series of performed acts within a regulatory framework that enforces norms and punishes deviance. Online platforms, with their emphasis on curated visibility and surveillance, extend these regulatory mechanisms. Women and queer users are frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny, harassment, and objectification, compelling them to self-censor or exit digital spaces altogether. Their digital subjectivity is thus shaped by pervasive threats of violence and misrecognition, making participation both risky and uneven.

Building on this, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989) helps to dissect the multilayered experiences of exclusion in the digital domain. It reveals how access, representation, and vulnerability in digital spaces are not determined by gender alone but intersect with caste, class, religion, ability, and sexuality. For example, Dalit women, Muslim women, and LGBTQ+ individuals in India face disproportionate abuse online, often targeted through casteist slurs, Islamophobic narratives, or gender-based trolling, as documented by organizations like Equality Labs and Amnesty India. Furthermore, feminist critiques such as those by Safiya Umoja Noble in *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) and Virginia Eubanks in *Automating Inequality* (2017) argue that technologies of classification, surveillance, and moderation are deeply racialized and gendered, rendering marginalized users not only invisible but also vulnerable to algorithmic violence. These critiques underscore how digital architectures themselves reproduce hegemonic norms, often under the guise of neutrality and efficiency. Together, these theoretical insights provide a critical lens for understanding how power operates within the digital public sphere not merely through content, but through platform design, regulation, and the social imaginaries they enable or suppress. They call for a feminist rethinking of digital inclusion that does not stop at access but interrogates how voice, safety, and agency are distributed in an increasingly digitized world.

### **Invisible Firewalls in the Digital Landscape**

The metaphor of “invisible firewalls” captures the often-unseen yet deeply embedded technological, social, and cultural barriers that regulate and restrict the participation of women and marginalized communities in the digital public sphere. These firewalls are not merely infrastructural but ideological constructed through algorithmic governance, surveillance regimes, and gender-based digital violence. They manifest as structural silencers, excluding voices from online discourse and reinforcing patriarchal norms under the guise of technological neutrality.

### **Algorithmic Bias and Platform Governance**

Digital platforms often perceived as democratic and open spaces are increasingly shaped by algorithmic logics that reflect and perpetuate societal biases. Safiya Umoja Noble, in her seminal work *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), demonstrates how search engine algorithms reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, privileging dominant narratives while obscuring marginalized perspectives. Similarly, Virginia Eubanks in *Automating Inequality* (2017) reveals how data-driven systems disproportionately harm poor, racialized, and gendered populations by encoding inequality into automated decision-making processes. Platform governance the rules and systems by which content is moderated, curated, and promoted is rarely transparent. Content moderation practices often act as hidden gatekeepers, disproportionately targeting marginalized voices for removal or silencing under vague community guidelines. For example, feminist or queer activism is frequently flagged as “explicit,” while hate speech and harassment remain under-enforced. This selective visibility is compounded by the lack of representational diversity in tech design and development, where dominant-caste, male, and Western-centric perspectives shape the digital architecture. Thus, algorithmic and governance-related firewalls not only distort the visibility of marginalized groups but also delegitimize their knowledge, reinforcing epistemic injustice within digital epistemologies.

### **Digital Surveillance and Control**

Surveillance functions as a core mechanism of control within the digital sphere, particularly for women and gender-diverse individuals. Gendered surveillance operates at multiple scales by the state, through biometric databases and predictive policing; by families, through monitoring of social media or mobile devices; and by institutions, which often regulate women's online behaviour in the name of “safety” or “honour.”

In the context of surveillance capitalism, as theorized by Shoshana Zuboff (2019), women's digital behaviours are not only monitored but commodified. Personal data ranging from browsing patterns to intimate messages becomes a site of extraction and profit. This commodification is not gender-neutral; it is layered by patriarchal controls that exploit affective labour and emotional expression for algorithmic predictions and advertising metrics. Moreover, in deeply patriarchal societies like India, socio-cultural norms act as informal yet potent firewalls. Women, especially from conservative or minority backgrounds, are discouraged or even prohibited



from participating online. The digital realm becomes a site of surveillance not just by platforms or the state but by community and familial networks, perpetuating forms of digital patriarchy that normalize control and invisibilize resistance.

### **Technology-Facilitated Violence**

The most explicit expression of gendered exclusion is the proliferation of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Women and marginalized users face a spectrum of attacks that include cyberstalking, doxxing (the release of private information), impersonation, deepfake pornography, non-consensual image sharing, and trolling. These acts are not merely digital annoyances; they have deep psychological, professional, and social ramifications. Numerous studies and reports, including those by UN Women, Amnesty International, and Internet Democracy Project India, underscore the rising rates of online abuse, especially against women journalists, activists, and public figures. Such harassment can result in self-censorship, withdrawal from public discourse, loss of employment opportunities, and long-term mental health issues. Legal mechanisms to combat this violence remain inadequate. In India, provisions under the Information Technology Act (Section 66E, 67A) and the Indian Penal Code (Sections 354D, 509, 499) offer limited and fragmented protection. The burden of proof often falls on the survivor, legal redress is slow, and enforcement lacks sensitivity to the gendered nuances of digital harm. Moreover, platform accountability is minimal, with social media corporations often failing to respond to abuse reports in a timely or effective manner. Thus, technology-facilitated violence functions as a disciplinary force, policing women's expression and deterring their participation in the digital public sphere.

### **Gendered Digital Divide: Access and Agency**

Despite the increasing centrality of digital technologies in everyday life, access to the internet and meaningful digital participation remains deeply unequal, especially along gender lines. The gendered digital divide is not merely a question of infrastructure or affordability it reflects broader power structures that govern access, control, and agency in digital life. This divide is particularly stark in the Global South, including India, where gender intersects with class, caste, region, religion, and ability to shape uneven digital realities.

### **Global and Indian Data on Gendered Access**

According to the Web Foundation (2021), women are 21% less likely than men to use mobile internet across low- and middle-income countries. In South Asia, this gap widens further to 41%, making it one of the most gender-unequal digital regions globally.

The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023 highlights that although mobile ownership and internet usage among women have improved globally, the progress has plateaued. In India, only 30% of rural women use mobile internet compared to 51% of rural men. Women are also significantly underrepresented in digital skilling programs, leading to limited professional and economic opportunities in an increasingly digitized job market.

The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) reported in 2022 that men constitute over 65% of internet users in urban areas and 72% in rural India. Such disparities are further reinforced by lower smartphone ownership among women, dependence on male family members for device access, and fear of surveillance or moral policing.

These numbers reveal that gender inequality in digital access is both systemic and persistent, affecting women's ability to engage fully in education, work, public discourse, and civic life.

### **Barriers to Digital Inclusion**

Several interrelated barriers contribute to the gendered digital divide:

**Affordability** remains a critical concern. Devices, data plans, and repair costs are often unaffordable for women and girls, especially in low-income households. Male members are usually prioritized for technology access due to their perceived economic roles.

**Infrastructure gaps** exacerbate exclusion, particularly in rural and remote areas where internet connectivity and electricity are unreliable. Even where infrastructure exists, women's movement outside the home may be restricted, limiting access to shared resources like cyber cafés or public Wi-Fi zones.

**Digital literacy** is a major hurdle. Many women and girls lack the skills to safely and confidently navigate the digital space. Training programs are often inaccessible, poorly tailored to their needs, or do not consider barriers such as mobility constraints and care responsibilities.

Without targeted interventions, digital empowerment remains out of reach for a large section of the population, further entrenching socio-economic inequities.

### **Cultural Attitudes and Gatekeeping**

Beyond material and infrastructural barriers, patriarchal norms and cultural expectations play a decisive role in shaping women's digital agency. In many communities, internet use by women and girls is seen as morally suspect or dangerous, leading to surveillance and restrictions imposed by families, schools, or local leaders.

Girls are often denied phone access during adolescence, particularly after incidents of online harassment or cyber violence. In conservative households, technology is viewed as a threat to family honour, with mobile phones and social media becoming sites of control and discipline. This cultural gatekeeping limits women's ability to access information, connect with peers, or seek help when facing abuse.

As research by the Internet Democracy Project and Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) shows, even when women have access to digital tools, they may lack control over them. Phones are shared, monitored, or password-protected by male relatives. Agency is further compromised when women self-censor or withdraw from digital spaces due to fear of judgment, punishment, or harassment.

These social norms and power relations turn the question of "access" into one of negotiated agency where simply being online does not equate to empowerment unless accompanied by autonomy and security.

The gendered digital divide, therefore, is not only a developmental or technological concern it is fundamentally a political and feminist issue. Addressing it requires more than bridging infrastructure or distributing devices. It demands systemic transformation in how access is defined, who gets to control it, and under what conditions. Without tackling the cultural and structural firewalls that regulate digital participation, digital inclusion will remain a myth for millions of women and gender-diverse individuals.

### **Resistance and Reclamation**

The digital sphere, while complicit in reinforcing gendered exclusions, also serves as a site for resistance, reclamation, and feminist transformation. From legal reform to grassroots organizing, multiple stakeholders are actively working to challenge the "invisible firewalls" that marginalize women and gender-diverse individuals online.

### **Legal and Institutional Interventions**

Internationally, bodies such as UN Women, UNESCO, and the Human Rights Council have recognized digital inclusion as a fundamental right and have called for gender-sensitive frameworks to address online harm. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights stress that technology companies bear the responsibility of respecting users' rights, including those related to gender and expression.

National efforts like India's Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, Information Technology (IT) Act, and the National Cyber Crime Reporting Cell aim to offer redress against online gender-based violence. However, these

responses often suffer from limited enforcement, lack of gender sensitivity, and inadequate digital literacy among both victims and law enforcement.

Digital rights organizations such as Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) in India, and international groups like Access Now and Equality Labs, are instrumental in pushing for greater transparency in platform governance, algorithmic accountability, and user protection, particularly for marginalized groups.

Despite institutional efforts, implementation gaps persist especially in the timely handling of complaints, recognition of non-consensual digital harms, and gender-competent law enforcement responses.

### **Community and Grassroots Responses**

Feminist interventions have often emerged organically at the grassroots level, challenging patriarchal logics embedded in technology through community organizing and education. Initiatives like Point of View's 'Digital Rights and Feminist Futures', Blank Noise, and Take Back the Tech! represent creative and critical interventions that empower women to reclaim digital spaces.

Feminist tech collectives engage in training women in digital safety, self-defence, open-source tools, and privacy practices. These programs often go beyond technical skills to address the emotional and cultural stigma around women's digital presence, making access both transformative and liberating.

Innovations in inclusive and ethical design such as participatory research, co-design with marginalized communities, and consent-centric platforms are paving new ways to counter digital bias and exclusion. The growing emphasis on "design justice" (as articulated by Sasha Costanza-Chock) marks a paradigm shift in how technologies are imagined and built.

The formation of digital counter publics alternative feminist, queer, caste-critical, and Dalit online communities has opened up spaces of solidarity, storytelling, and epistemic resistance. These counter publics challenge dominant narratives and create knowledge from the margins, fostering pluralism in the digital realm.

### **Toward a Feminist Digital Justice Framework**

Reimagining the digital public sphere demands a shift from reactive strategies to proactive, systemic change. A feminist digital justice framework offers a holistic, equity-centered approach that moves beyond access to emphasize autonomy, accountability, and intersectionality.

This framework is grounded in the following principles:

**Equity over equality:** Recognizing that different communities face different structural barriers, and that equitable access must be tailored to those realities.

**Intersectionality:** Building policies that reflect overlapping oppressions based on gender, caste, class, sexuality, religion, and disability.

**Accountability:** Demanding transparency in algorithms, content moderation, and platform policies, particularly from Big Tech.

**Participatory governance:** Including diverse voices—especially from the margins—in decision-making processes around platform rules, tech design, and data regulation.

### **Recommendations include:**

For **platform developers:** Adopt inclusive design practices, enable robust reporting mechanisms, and ensure algorithmic fairness.

For **educators and researchers:** Integrate critical digital literacy and feminist tech studies into curricula to build long-term awareness.

For **policymakers**: Enact gender-transformative digital laws, fund community-based digital initiatives, and ensure state accountability in cyber governance.

For **civil society and grassroots actors**: Foster peer networks, capacity-building, and knowledge sharing rooted in lived experience.

This framework envisions not just safer digital spaces but transformative ones where marginalized identities are not merely included but celebrated as co-creators of digital futures.

## CONCLUSION

In mapping the terrain of the digital public sphere, this paper has explored how invisible firewalls in the form of algorithms, surveillance, techno-patriarchy, and socio-cultural norms continue to exclude and marginalize women and gender-diverse individuals. However, it has also highlighted the resistance and resilience of feminist actors who challenge these barriers and envision inclusive alternatives. The call for a feminist digital justice framework is both urgent and necessary not just as a response to exclusion, but as a blueprint for equitable participation, intersectional policy, and transformative change in the digital era. As digital technologies shape every aspect of modern life, from governance to labour to identity, the stakes are too high to ignore the structural biases they carry. This is a critical moment for scholars, activists, developers, and policymakers to collaborate across disciplines and geographies to dismantle invisible firewalls, amplify marginalized voices, and co-create inclusive, just, and feminist digital futures.

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