



## **Digitalisation, AI and Feminist Futures**

A Joint Hybrid Conference of *Feminist Africa* and the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*

Maputo, Mozambique, and online, July 25 to 28, 2024

### **Concept Note and Call for Papers**

The world is in the midst of a technological revolution characterised by the rapid development of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Like any revolution, this one is full of contradictions, promising new freedoms and opportunities on the one hand, while spawning frightening disruptions and disorienting innovations on the other. The powerful interests fuelling these disruptions are embedded in patriarchal, capitalist and imperial logics. Though digital divides are a major impediment for women and marginalised persons in resource-constrained contexts, this is not only a matter of access. Issues of online violence and harassment, digital surveillance, and new forms of labour informality thrive in these oppressive logics marked by intersecting inequalities of class, race, gender, generation, as well as rural/urban divides. Proponents of AI, notably machine learning, promise that it will enhance human capacities for creating better worlds while ignoring the fact that existing inequalities are often baked into these new technologies.

As technological developments outpace projects of social justice, we consider it urgent to interrogate the phenomenon of digitalisation and AI from the vantage point of the African continent, its diasporas, and beyond. We are proposing a conference jointly organised by *Feminist Africa* and the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. We seek to understand the imperial, neocolonial, and patriarchal dynamics of digitalisation and AI as they play out in the spaces structured by the operations of transnational digital corporations. Convening in Mozambique, we highlight Africa and its diasporas as zones of creativity and resistance in the face of diverse colonial histories and structures of domination, amid shifting geopolitical configurations of power. From a pan-African feminist and decolonial perspective of Africa-centred development, we are interested in exploring the threats and opportunities that digitalisation and AI present for African women and persons Othered by class, rural/urban divides, sexuality, race and other dimensions of inequality, in Africa, its diasporas, and globally. While we privilege contributions from the African continent and its diasporas, we welcome feminist contributions addressing the dynamics of digitalisation and AI elsewhere in the world. We recognise that across the globe, multiple structures of inequality shape polities, economies, and societies in contextually-specific ways; our

focus on the dynamics of digital technologies and AI in diverse contexts engages this complexity by decentring the nation-state and facilitating transnational, transregional, and transdisciplinary conversations. The locus of our attention, all the while, is on the implications for building feminist futures that transcend capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism, that is, feminist futures which sustain freedom from violence and injustice, while promoting human flourishing. We invite proposals for papers on three broad themes, outlined in greater detail below: a) governance and democracy; b) work; and c) knowledge production.

## **Governance and Democracy**

Digitalisation promises to make information more widely available and to facilitate new modes of political participation, thus strengthening democracy. Digital technologies have enabled feminist activism and sustained uprisings such as the anti-SARS movement in Nigeria, the #ShutItAllDownNamibia movement, the #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall movements, the mobilisations against government repression in North Africa and the Middle East, and the protests by women and girls in Iran. Digital technologies have also facilitated public consultations, such as those on new constitutions in Latin America, and internationally, on the development of the SDGs. Such uses of digital technology have helped to promote broader engagement in public discourse, through the expression of dissent as well as alternative ideas.

At the same time, social media have encouraged the circulation of the most extreme views, spreading misinformation and disinformation in ways that endanger not only democracy but also people's survival. This happened during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, and is currently manifested across the globe in the online amplification of cultures that normalise violence against gender non-conforming people. The constitution of echo chambers solidifies extremist convictions that have contributed to the rise of populism and a global backlash against feminism.

The potential of a digital commons is negated by the ownership and control of social media platforms by private enterprises and the ways in which they facilitate unprecedented surveillance. Corporations extract personal information from vast numbers of people and convert it into Big Data, which they then sell back to consumers at enormous profits. Aside from the extractivist nature of these practices, this raises serious questions of privacy and data protection. Moreover, various forms of decision-making are increasingly delegated to algorithms and AI, making it difficult to hold corporations accountable and profoundly destabilising notions of human autonomy. Feminists are vocal critics of these developments and are coming together to imagine alternatives to this digital colonisation of the public sphere, developing 'data feminism' and envisioning a feminist AI.

We invite papers that interrogate the following indicative questions:

- How have digitalisation and AI enhanced and/or distorted public opinion and debate? What are the implications for the participation of women and marginalised people in politics, public discourse, and governance? What are the effects on feminism and social justice projects, including movement organising?

- How have digital technologies shaped the experiences of women and marginalised people in electoral processes, such as the possibility of being elected, and/or violence against women politicians?
- How have digital technologies been used to galvanise conservative, nationalist and populist sentiments, and hate crimes? How can governance address new forms of physical violence motivated by participation in digital communities and online games? What efforts exist to hold digital technology corporations accountable, in differing social and economic contexts?
- How do the tech corporations' uses of digital technology and AI to exploit the human desire for connection, affect individual freedom, notions of intimacy, and people's autonomy? How are these experiences shaped by intersecting layers of inequality?
- How can feminists disrupt the corporate capture of digital technologies and what alternatives are they creating? What is the scope for constructing a more egalitarian digital commons? How can digital technologies and AI be used to envision and work towards feminist futures that are free from violence and injustice?

## **Work**

Digitalisation and AI profoundly disrupt the world of work; or, framed more optimistically, they offer opportunities for reimagining the way work has been organised in institutional settings. Women traders and those working in agroprocessing are finding both opportunities and threats in the development of e-commerce and digital finance. The new 'gig economy' employs digital apps to connect those offering a range of services to customers – from housing and transport to health care and sex. In addition, web-based, online platform work comprises a heterogeneous spectrum ranging from repetitive micro-tasks to highly skilled work, such as web development and programming. Digitalisation and AI thus ostensibly make it easier for marginalised workers to reach a customer base, access finance, or enter the labour force.

Yet, in their current form, online labour platforms also drive neoliberal informality to new heights. Problems range from a lack of access (such as the gender gap in mobile phone ownership) to new extremes of exploitation. Algorithmic management rates workers on the basis of digital surveillance, often biased along the lines of gender, race, and continental location, thus influencing workers' chances of getting new jobs and rewards. Internet platforms peddle feminised labour, from the provision of maid services to online sex. They also draw on colonial legacies to determine who is paid what, particularly regarding difficult types of labour like the traumatising work of moderating violent content. Virtually unregulated, online platform work muddies the waters regarding who is an employer under existing labour laws, not least given that contracting companies, operating platforms, clients, and workers may all be dispersed across different countries and jurisdictions. While such features may characterise online labour platforms across diverse geographical locations, the resulting dynamics and experiences in these locations are likely to be more contextually specific.

We invite papers that interrogate the following indicative questions:

- What are the configurations of power relations among online labour and service platforms, the companies setting them up, clients, and workers in diverse contexts? What infrastructures, rules, and materials are assumed to be/actually are in place and how do these affect the work practices, bodies, emotions, and intimate/personal domains of the women and marginalised persons engaged in platform labour?
- What kinds of work do women and marginalised persons do in locally-based gig economies? How do they view their earnings and working conditions? What gendered, racialised, and colonial power relations do they negotiate, including with global companies?
- How do digital technologies and AI influence social reproduction, whether in the form of women's unpaid care and domestic labour, or in terms of state provisioning and/or private sector/community-based provision of various forms of welfare and care? What are the implications for women's lives, when online-enabled plans of violence and actual attacks target physical sites of care and social reproduction, such as schools?
- What efforts are women and marginalised persons engaged in, to form online worker communities/communities of solidarity to resist exploitative earnings and working relations?
- How can digital technologies and AI be harnessed to build economies centred around social reproduction, care, and social provisioning?

### **Knowledge production**

Digitalisation and AI have profound implications not only for the circulation of knowledge, but also for its production and for how we teach. The datafication of lives and selves, paired with algorithmic decision-making, augur forms of embodiment that fuse bodies and data, raising new questions about the meanings of 'the human' and the way knowledge is produced. For feminists, it also raises the question of what it means to think of knowledge as embodied and situated. And it raises questions about what we do in our (increasingly online) classrooms, how we incorporate new technologies or keep them at bay.

While there is thus a profound need for reflection about the human impacts of digitalisation, many higher education institutions in Africa and elsewhere have responded by emphasising the fundamental importance of STEM subjects – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – at the expense of the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities. Although scientific and technological knowledge is required to address the design and functioning of digital technology and AI, this is not enough. The assumptions and specific choices underlying the functioning of digital technology and algorithmic decision-making raise far-reaching political, economic, philosophical and cultural questions that need to be addressed.

As feminist journal editors, we are particularly concerned with the way in which the political economy of digitalisation in the publishing industry is threatening to aggravate epistemic hierarchies and exclusions. The industry increasingly thrives on metadata (including citation indexes and rankings) which commodify the behaviour of authors and readers, and influence what we read and cite. This narrows the reach of authorship in mainstream journals and contributes to the systemic lockout of certain epistemic communities. A number of feminist journals in Latin

America and Africa make their content freely available, outside the increasingly monopolistic publishing industry which dominates Anglophone knowledge circulation. Yet exclusion from the commercial platforms of Northern-based publishers perpetuates the restricted visibility of knowledge produced by feminists in Africa, its diasporas, and elsewhere in the global South.

We invite papers that interrogate the following indicative questions:

- How are digital technologies and AI changing/disrupting/resignifying the meanings of the human? What does embodiment and situated knowing mean in light of these new assemblages of human/non-human? What forms of feminist futures become imaginable when categories of humanity are disrupted and reconfigured?
- How do digitalisation and AI affect how we research and teach? How do knowledge platforms (or online platform teaching) reshape how education and research happens? How do digitalisation and AI impact/transform feminist pedagogy, epistemology, and ontology?
- How does technological reductionism underpin the valorisation of STEM at the expense of the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities in diverse social and economic contexts? How do feminists engage with the disciplinary and academic politics giving rise to such reductionism?
- How does digitalisation impact the circulation of scholarly knowledge, and of gender studies knowledge in particular? How do feminist journals negotiate current technological developments? How can they collaborate to subvert the epistemic hierarchies and exclusions inherent in the political economy of digitalisation which underpins the Northern-based publishing industry?
- How can feminist theories and practice be drawn upon to advance more equitable, just, and non-violent feminist futures? How are alternative imaginations of feminist futures grappling with notions of spatiality and temporality beyond the international and/or the global?

### **Conference format**

The conference will take place in Maputo, Mozambique, from July 25 to 28, 2024. It will bring together feminist scholars, activists, practitioners and creatives, and will consist of a combination of plenary presentations and roundtables, panels with scholarly papers, and an exhibition. Plenaries will be live-streamed and will allow for hybrid participation.

### **Submission guidelines**

Proposals for Papers, Panels, and Roundtables should include a title, an abstract of 200-250 words, a bio, and contact information (including an email address). Although both *Feminist Africa* and the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* publish in English, we welcome proposals and conference presentations in English, Portuguese or French.

Please submit proposals to this [link](#): For enquiries, send an email to [contact@feministafrica.net](mailto:contact@feministafrica.net)  
**The deadline for submission is 17 November 2023.** Outcomes will be communicated by 15 January 2024.