

Feminism and the Digital Era: Challenges and Opportunities in Africa

Nkem Agunwa

Abstract

This article examines the intersection between feminism and the digital era in Africa, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that arise. It explores how digital platforms have become pivotal for amplifying women's voices, challenging misogyny, and driving social change. However, it also delves into the gendered digital divide, privacy concerns, algorithmic biases, and new forms of media manipulation that disproportionately impact women in Africa. The article concludes by underscoring the potential of digital tools in empowering women in Africa while emphasising the urgency of addressing prevailing challenges to ensure inclusive digital participation and advancing gender justice.

Keywords: Feminism, misogyny, harassment, artificial intelligence, social media.

Introduction

In 2017, Diane Shima Rwigara dared to challenge President Paul Kagame's 23-year rule by attempting to be the first woman president of Rwanda. Immediately after announcing her presidential bid, Rwigara alleged that photoshopped nude photos of her were being circulated online by trolls acting on behalf of Kagame's regime (Rwigara 2017). In a poignant parallel, Rinu Oduala, a young Nigerian activist thrust into the global spotlight during the 2020 #EndSARS protest, has equally suffered different forms of online violence, including sexually explicit photos purporting to strip her of her legitimacy and voice (Oduala 2023). These narratives are a dark reminder that the virtual realm, promising connection and enlightenment, can also serve as a sinister stage for new forms of gender-based violence aimed at diminishing women's engagement and feminist expressions.

The digital era opened up new spaces for women to express themselves and defend the issues they believe in without the traditional gatekeepers who often overlook women's issues (The World Bank Group 2014, 152–154). However, digital spaces are not free of gatekeepers either; the old guards have simply been replaced with more powerful and insidious ones. The weaponisation of digital spaces against women stifles their expression and causes them harm. While gender-based violence (GBV) is not new, digital technology allows for an alarming rate of collective and coordinated anonymous targeting of people. The rapidly maturing extended reality (XR) lays the foundations for emerging digital environments, introducing new threats to women and girls and expanding existing ones. Emerging forms of technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), are bringing to the fore many human rights concerns related to sexual and gender-based violence. Outlaw (2018) found in a survey that 49% of women had experienced sexual harassment at least once while using virtual reality. The number is bound to increase with big tech's rapid adoption and mainstreaming of XR. While the social networking components allowing users to interact in these digital environments provide tremendous opportunities for campaigning and activism against gender injustice generally, and particularly GBV, they also introduce new forms of violence against women, including simulated groping and gang rape.

How is sexual violence in the digital age normatively understood without physicality?

Research has demonstrated that online sexual and gender-based violence psychologically impacts survivors (Amnesty International and Ipsos MORI 2017, 48). The human brain interprets perceived threats in virtual spaces as actual threats (Baker, Pawling and Fairclough 2020). We must see the threat of online GBV not only when it translates to offline harm. Online GBV is violence and must not be treated with levity.

This underscores the need to elevate the conversation on safety by design. Safety must no longer be a response to threats; we must be proactive. Millions of women and sexual minorities are limiting their engagement on social media to minimise the harm they suffer on these platforms (Plan International 2020, 31–33). A recent study carried out by Plan International (2020) in over 30 countries across multiple continents reveals that one in five girls globally has left

or significantly reduced their use of social media after being harassed, including on Facebook and Instagram. Relatedly, Amnesty International's (2017) study targeting 4,000 women aged 18–55 in eight countries indicated that around 25% of the surveyed women encountered online abuse or harassment at least once (Amnesty International and Ipsos MORI 2017). Notably, among those who experienced such online abuse, 41% mentioned that the abusive content made them genuinely concerned about their physical safety. This content encompassed threats of physical harm and sexual assault, which were particularly alarming. The anonymity and distance that the digital space creates embolden misogynistic expression without the fear of immediate consequences (Fox, Cruz and Lee 2015). The online disinhibition effect developed by Suler (2004) outlines anonymity as one of the factors within digital platforms that empowers users to participate in actions they would hesitate to undertake in personal interactions.

Furthermore, algorithm bias disproportionately affects women and contributes to the reinforcement of harmful gender stereotypes (Fabris et al. 2020). Algorithms are instructions used to process data and make decisions that can inadvertently embed biases in the data they are trained on (Fabris et al. 2020). When these biases are related to gender, they can potentially reinforce gender stereotypes, negatively impacting women, and perpetuating existing inequalities. Amid the rise of machine-learning systems like generative AI, women face growing vulnerability to its adverse effects. Facial recognition applications often struggle with women of colour, while large language models perpetuate gender stereotypes (Buolamwini 2019; Brennan 2023). Such technologies over-emphasise biases such as white supremacy and misogyny in their training data, exacerbating harm and amplifying prejudice (Bender et al. 2021).

Additionally, the financial resources needed for owning digital devices and acquiring internet data bundles systematically exclude women from active engagement in the digital realm. In 2023, the Global System for Mobile Communications Association found that in all 12 survey countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, women were less likely than men to own a smartphone (Jeffrie 2023, 26–27). This form of exclusion, in turn, denies women access to the various economic, social, and political prospects that thrive within the digital sphere.

Online hostility shutting women out on the Continent

It is essential to recognise that while the digital space has provided new opportunities for women's leadership in African social justice movements, it has also presented new challenges for the feminist movement. One of the main challenges is the harassment and attacks that women face online, which often translate to offline violence. Online harassment can take many forms, including sexist, racist, or misogynistic comments, threats of violence, and doxing – where personal information is shared publicly without consent (van der Wilk 2021, 9–10, 26–34). These attacks can have a chilling effect on women's participation in public discourse and limit their ability to speak critically on essential issues.

Additionally, the digital space has allowed for the distortion of feminist principles and the co-optation of the language of gender by anti-gender campaigners. These groups use social media to spread disinformation and sow division, painting feminists as “man-haters” or “anti-family” while promoting traditional gender roles and patriarchal values. Moreover, the weaponisation of closed groups on social media and text messaging platforms is creating dark social webs that cultivate and promote sexual violence against women. There is good reason for the encryption of these closed platforms, but it is increasingly being weaponised against the most vulnerable. For example, in Senegal, a private closed Facebook group – *Homme Choc* – was exposed in 2022 for engendering violence against women (Gueye 2022).

Homme Choc is an incel group on Facebook created in 2019 with over 20,000 members, including supposedly high-standing members of society, such as journalists, artists, media executives, social media influencers, lawyers, and gender equality campaigners, who publish sexist, misogynistic comments that whip up violence, rape, and attacks on the physical and psychological integrity of women and girls who are already in a vulnerable situation (Gueye 2022). It took courageous feminists from the Collective of Feminists of Senegal to expose the group, but the morning after came with several forms of online harassment and intimidation, including accusations against the feminists of being lesbians. This was to distract from the issue, discredit their voices, and expose them to offline harm. In Senegal, like many other African countries, same-sex relations are illegal, and the state often sanctions violence against the LGBTQIA+

community (Reality Check Team 2023). So, the accusation of being homosexual in a conservative state such as Senegal essentially put a target on their backs. These ladies had to hide while the predators continued to prowl the internet for more potential victims. In understanding the digital threats to feminism, it is crucial to recognise the intersectionality of women's experiences and how different forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, and homophobia, can impact their ability to participate in online spaces.

The rapidly transforming digital space increases the vulnerability of women online. New forms of media manipulation, aided by AI and other forms of synthetic media (also known as “deepfake”), disproportionately affect women. Such devious technology can make an individual say or do something they never did or even create a situation that never existed. Unfortunately, women public figures, including activists, journalists, and politicians, are more likely to be depicted in non-consensual sexually explicit activities (Internet Governance Forum 2021, 9–10). The proliferation of tools, including the emergence of generative AI, to produce deepfake makes it easier to produce highly convincing content and increases the likelihood of ordinary people being targeted.

Deepfake technology threatens women's safety and autonomy, particularly in the digital space. The increasing accessibility and sophistication of this technology mean that women are at risk of their identities and reputations being damaged and being subjected to further harassment and violence. This is a significant concern for women who are already marginalised and face societal discrimination.

Women take up spaces of power online

In spite of the challenges discussed above, women are resisting and taking up spaces online. Their use of short-form videos to entrench feminist principles is gaining more visibility, partly because social media algorithms aggressively promote short-form video content on these platforms. This is significant because detractors have worked hard to mischaracterise what it means to be a feminist. Indeed, the constant demonisation of feminism is heteropatriarchal-capitalism and misogyny fighting back. However, it is refreshing to see young feminists use

short-form videos to break down such misconceptions and own the narrative in powerful ways that are reverberating within and outside the movement.

The strength of short-form videos is their ability to cross-pollinate across platforms. Their fluidity also makes it difficult for detractors to counteract. There are many ingenious ways women are stepping into their power on social media. These allow their voices to be elevated above the noise. Social media platforms showed that this was possible during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to the pervasive pandemic-related disinformation, where specifically authorised accounts were elevated as verified sources of information (Gregory, Kayyali and Faife 2020). The same tactic must be deployed to elevate and protect women's voices online, where mob attacks and silencing in the digital space are the order of the day. Digital space has provided a unique opportunity to elevate the profiles of women movement leaders in Africa.

Historically, women have played significant roles in social justice movements across the continent, but their contributions have often been overlooked or overshadowed by their male counterparts (Swift 2017). This lack of recognition was particularly acute in the struggle for independence in many African countries (Asiedu 2019). An example that demonstrates the elevation of women movement leaders through online media is the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, which saw women organisers and leaders at the forefront (Cele and support staff 2015). The #FeesMustFall movement showcased a shift in activism, leveraging personalised approaches and social media (Bosch 2020). This empowered women to assume leadership roles and enabled them to spearhead awareness campaigns on campuses and nationally, addressing the escalating costs of higher education tuition fees in South Africa.

Another example is the #ThisFlag movement in Zimbabwe, in which women leaders used social media to mobilise and organise protests against the economic failures of their government (Shamuyarira 2016). Similarly, Nigerian women in the #EndSARS movement were instrumental in organising protests and advocating for an end to police brutality (Darkwah et al. 2022; Haynes 2020). The iconic images of Alaa Salah leading a protest in Sudan against the 30-year dictatorship of Omar el Bashir and of Aisha Yesufu against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad in Nigeria symbolise the power inherent in women's voices and serve as visible references for other women (Ukpong 2020).

Recommendations

To digital platform providers

Given the right investment, there are some practical approaches that could reduce the vulnerability to media manipulation on platforms and empower users. Labelling and disclosure of how media is made is a powerful positive dimension of contemporary media creation (Partnership of AI 2023). It is essential that users are empowered with adequate information on when and how a media content is altered while protecting privacy and fundamental human rights (Castellanos 2023).

The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity, also known as C2PA (Castellanos 2022), is the first industry specification that makes it easier for users to track the source and edit of any media, also revisiting conceptions of digital dignity and likeness rights. This functionality reduces vulnerability to disinformation, including deepfakes targeting women through non-consensual explicit media.

There should be increased adaptation of these standards by technology platforms, and they should be applied within a human rights framework that respects the right to dignity and privacy of users on the platforms. Furthermore, social media platforms must ensure that community standards are reflective of the diverse communities and backgrounds that interact on the platforms. There are situations where women have reported that their images are used by strange accounts as profiles or display pictures in which they get feedback from social media technology platforms saying that the reported case does not violate the community standards. It begs the question, whose community are they referencing? Achieving an inclusive community standard requires continuous fostering of global participation in emerging policies and tools that will have a global impact.

The global majority is underserved across the board by social media platforms, including with regards to online GBV and women's rights (Takhshid 2021). Digital platforms have a responsibility to invest adequately in implementing their policies in the global majority. This investment should include more human moderators who understand the local context, increased language support,

and constant updating of indigenous lexicons outside of the usual suspects of Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. The volume of online content continues to grow exponentially, which makes it challenging for human moderators to keep up with the influx – thereby making it inevitable that algorithms play a higher role in content moderation.

Social media algorithms must be trained to understand and recognise diverse content, including content that may not conform to dominant cultural or social norms. This requires a diverse dataset for training algorithms and ongoing monitoring and adjustment of the algorithms to ensure they are not biased or discriminatory.

Furthermore, algorithmic content moderation must be complemented by human review and oversight to ensure fair and transparent decisions. This means that users should be provided with clear and accessible information on how content moderation works, including how to appeal decisions. There should be an open and transparent process for reviewing and challenging algorithm decisions.

While content moderation is a responsibility that platforms should primarily handle, users can still play a significant role in helping to flag inappropriate content or direct the system to take action. However, most users are unaware of their potential to help or learn how to contribute meaningfully to content moderation efforts. This is where in-app media literacy can be beneficial. By providing users with information on how they can contribute to content moderation and how to identify and report inappropriate content, platforms can empower their users to help keep their communities safe and free from harmful content.

In-app media literacy can also help to increase critical thinking skills among users. By educating them on identifying mis/disinformation, deepfakes, and other manipulated content, users can become more discerning and less likely to fall for disinformation or propaganda.

In addition to educating users on identifying and reporting inappropriate content, in-app media literacy can inform users of the safety measures already available on the platform. For example, platforms may have reporting systems, content filters, or other tools that users can use to protect themselves from harassment or other harmful content.

There is also the need to introduce a reverse image/video search on platforms. This would give users an easy tool to ascertain the authenticity of media content, including non-consensual sexually explicit images and videos.

To governments

The entire ecosystem in which platforms exist must recognise data privacy and protection as a feminist issue. Data breaches by perpetrators of violence disproportionately impact women. The perpetrators range from sexual predators to political opponents who release personal and often intimate information about women to shame, silence, and delegitimise them. Governments should, through sensible regulation, ensure that tech platforms strengthen their data privacy measures to better protect women users on the platforms. In addition, governments should enact more data protection laws or update existing laws and fund their enforcement to prevent harmful actions and guarantee justice for the harm done.

To feminist groups and civil society

There is a dearth of research on the impact of new forms of technology, including AI, on feminism and feminist struggles. There needs to be a prioritisation of research that examines the challenges and opportunities that lie therein. In addition, civil society can also advocate for new laws and/or the amendment of existing laws that would better protect people from digital-based GBV and data privacy breaches. Also, civil society organisations should push for the operationalisation of gender response departments within law enforcement operations that understand digital threats, while, at the same time, advocating that perpetrators of violence, both online and offline, are brought to justice in a fair trial.

Conclusion

Feminism in the digital era presents both opportunities and challenges. The digital space has elevated the profile of women's movements in Africa and provided a platform for their voices to be heard. Women's leadership and activism is more visible, inspiring a new generation of feminists to take leadership roles. However, the digital era also poses new challenges to feminism, including online harassment, media manipulation, and algorithmic bias. There is a need for collective action from governments, social media companies, civil society, and individuals to address these challenges. We must work towards creating a safe and inclusive digital space for everyone, where women's voices are amplified, their rights are protected, and their leadership is valued. By doing so, we can continue to build a more equitable and just society, both online and offline.

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