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Invisible Biases, Visible Harm: Algorithmic Misogyny and Gendered Vulnerabilities in India

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Abstract:

Contemporary feminists critique digital governance, emphasising the widespread problem of algorithmic misogyny. This paper demonstrates how automated institutions operate within some vital spheres, reiterating and generating gendered injustices whose implications are deeply rooted in social policy, welfare, and civic equality in India and beyond. Data bias, unclear decision-making, platform amplification, and labour algorithms contribute to harm, as seen in welfare exclusion linked to Aadhaar and the online auctioning of women on Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai apps. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these vulnerabilities. Mechanisms and effects are traced through the integration of feminist theory, critical algorithm studies, policy analysis, and empirical evidence. This paper aims to align the Beijing+30 renewal with gender audits and feminist governance by analysing "algorithmic misogyny," uncovering patterns of exclusion and violence, and proposing policy pathways to hold algorithmic systems accountable to gender justice.

Keywords:

Algorithmic misogyny;

Feminist digital governance;

Gendered surveillance;

Intersectionality;

Platform violence

Introduction

In recent years, digital technologies have been heralded as tools of inclusion and empowerment, yet they increasingly reproduce social hierarchies and exclusions. Hidden within the code and data of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic systems are ingrained biases—especially misogyny—that translate into real harms for women. In India, the combination of patriarchal social structures with rapidly expanding digital governance has produced a new form of gendered inequality: *algorithmic misogyny*. This term refers to how automated systems and data-driven policies perpetuate sexist stereotypes, amplify harassment, and deny resources to women and gender minorities. Far from being neutral, these technologies often embed historical power imbalances, rendering certain groups invisible or delegitimised. Safiya Noble's (2018) influential study argues that "algorithmic oppression" is not a mere glitch but an intrinsic feature of how the web functions (p. 10).

In the Indian context, these invisible biases become visible in livelihoods lost, welfare withheld, and lives endangered—distinctions painfully evident during the COVID-19 crisis. This article critically examines how algorithmic systems in India embed misogyny and gendered harms, the ways the pandemic magnified these effects, and how feminist interventions grounded in the Beijing+30 framework could reshape technology for equity. The study draws on feminist theory, critical algorithm studies, and case evidence—such as Aadhaar-based welfare exclusions and online hate campaigns (e.g., *Sulli Deals*, *Bulli Bai*)—to map the problem. Key feminist scholars, e.g., Noble, Eubanks, and Radhakrishnan, teach us that digital technologies are *sociotechnical systems* embedded in culture and politics, not objective machines. In India, where digital ID and platform economies are ubiquitous, gendered "legibility" issues (Bansal & Agrawal, 2025) and online hate campaigns

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signal an urgent need for feminist digital governance. We argue that a "Beijing+30" approach—revitalising the 1995 Beijing Declaration's commitment to gender equality in a digital world—requires redefining policy, technical design, and social norms so that technology protects rather than punishes women.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This analysis is grounded in feminist scholarship on technology and power. Postcolonial and intersectional feminists remind us that technical systems are shaped by dominant ideologies (Haraway, 1991; Acker, 1990). As Radhika Radhakrishnan (2021) explains for Indian health AI, such systems "should not be seen as neutral products but [as] complex sociotechnical processes embedded with gendered knowledge and labour" (p. 1). Similarly, Safiya Noble (2018) and Virginia Eubanks (2018) document how "automated" decision-making can produce a "digital poorhouse," reproducing racial and gender hierarchies under the guise of efficiency. These scholars show that bias is not a glitch but a machine learning feature: training data drawn from biased societies yields sexist outputs (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). For example, Amazon's AI recruiting tool downgraded resumes with the word "women," reflecting past hiring biases rather than deliberate malice (Dastin, 2018). More broadly, feminist techno-critique emphasises *situated knowledge*: choices about data, labels, and objectives invisibly encode gender norms (Noble, 2018; Radhakrishnan, 2021). Selbst et al. (2019) call for "auditable" and inclusive design, arguing that who codes AI matters as much as how it is coded.

Digital governance frameworks are another critical lens. Following Zuboff (2019), we see contemporary digital capitalism as a new "surveillance" architecture that disproportionately ensnares women. Feminist analysts point out that surveillance technologies often reinforce patriarchal control (Imam et al., 2025, p. 53; Zuboff, 2019). In an Indian context, scholars note that e-governance without safeguards—like Aadhaar's biometric ID—turns into social sorting (Dixon, 2017) and can even criminalise poverty (Tapasya et al., 2024). Feminist digital rights activists highlight that laws (India's IT Rules) often lack gender sensitivity, enabling hate speech and doxxing of women activists (Hirji, 2021). Opposing viewpoints argue that algorithmic systems are value-neutral and solve corruption; critics counter that this "efficiency" rhetoric obscures who bears the cost. For instance, biometric failures that "weed out" "fraudulent" ration cardholders turned out to disproportionately exclude poor women due to data errors (Tapasya et al., 2024; Aishwarya, 2025).

Feminist theory also informs our concept of harm. Drawing on Eubanks (2018) and Noble (2018), the analysis distinguishes *representational harms* (stereotyping, invisibility) from *allocation harms* (denied services, resources). Cyber feminists emphasise that online misogyny is a form of digital violence, undermining women's agency (Dehingia et al., 2023). Theoretical frameworks of "power/knowledge" (Foucault, 1978) and "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1991) underline that algorithmic harms are layered: a woman's experience depends on class, caste, religion, etc. This layered approach is crucial in India, where marginalised women often suffer compounded digital exclusion. Thus, our theoretical stance sees algorithmic misogyny as a systemic problem requiring structural solutions, not just technical fixes.

Mapping Algorithmic Misogyny in India

Algorithmic misogyny manifests across welfare exclusion, platform harassment, gig-economy bias, and amplification loops, disproportionately targeting multiply-marginalised women.

Digital ID and welfare systems

Indian biometric ID (Aadhaar) and associated algorithms were meant to streamline subsidies, but in practice, "Aadhaar has become more of a barrier than an enabler," especially for informal-sector women (Bansal & Agrawal, 2025; Jose & Aishwarya, 2025). For example, one investigation showed that a digital profiling system erroneously flagged a poor widow's household as "car-owning," cutting off her food rations (Tapasya et al., 2024). Such errors occur because fingerprints worn by manual labourers (common among women in agriculture or cleaning work) fail to match, and photo-ID or online mechanisms cannot easily accommodate childcare or pregnancy needs (Gupta, 2025). Even when Aadhaar data exists, restricted internet access and digital literacy gaps disproportionately shut out rural women (Jose & Aishwarya, 2025). Consequently, programs like maternity benefits, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), and subsidised food often remain unrealised for those most in need.

Social media and platform algorithms

Algorithmic newsfeeds are known to privilege sensational content (e.g., angry or provocative posts) (Seidel, 2020). In India's communal context, this means algorithms often bubble up casteist or Islamophobic misogyny. In 2021 and 2022, two crowdsourced "apps", *Sulli Deals* and *Bulli Bai*, were used to target Indian Muslim women by listing them for mock online auctions. These were not corporate algorithms but user-generated content shared via GitHub, yet they highlight how tech affordances facilitate misogyny. As one affected pilot recounted, seeing her photo on the *Sulli Deals* app left her "upset and angry that someone could do this to me" (Jazeera, 2022). Even mainstream sites contribute: Instagram reels and TikTok have surfaced deeply sexist notions (e.g. slut-shaming videos), while WhatsApp forwards circulate fabricated rumours about women politicians. Qualitative studies confirm that women public figures face intertwined sexist and communal abuse online (Nazmine et al., 2021). Thus, even without a single "algorithmic campaign," widespread platform use creates an environment where misogynistic digital violence thrives.

Platform economies and labor algorithms

Women in India's gig work (e.g. ride-hailing, delivery, or home services) face algorithmic control that ignores their specific needs (Bansal, 2023). Online hiring portals (even AI-driven ones) often downrank "women's" experience: a resume mentioning women's college events was penalised (Ghosh et al., 2023). Even fintech credit algorithms have been found to under-lend to women entrepreneurs due to "skewed credit data" trained mostly on male borrowers (Gupta, 2025). These cases exemplify algorithmic exclusion: from welfare benefits to job opportunities, women end up either invisible to systems or penalised by them.

COVID-19 as a Critical Juncture

The pandemic both exposed and intensified algorithmic misogyny. COVID-19 pushed everything digital and brought hidden biases into relief. During lockdowns, many women shifted to online platforms for work, healthcare, and community, but these spaces were often unwelcoming or even dangerous. Analysing Twitter data from 2018–2021, Dehingia et al. (2023) found that India's absolute volume and share of misogynistic tweets rose significantly during COVID-19. Harassing language, sexual objectification, and threats of violence against women swelled online, reflecting "increasing gender inequalities" and attempts to "reinforce traditional gender norms" (Dehingia et al., 2023). In other words, the crisis-era algorithms were amplifying the most toxic content.

Government digitalisation also raced ahead. Relief schemes—food rations, cash transfers, health services—were funnelled through digital IDs and contactless tech. The Telangana Samagra case vividly illustrates disaster: a widow deprived of subsidised food because an AI profiler misclassified her late husband as a car owner (Tapasya et al., 2024). In total, 1.86 million ration cards were revoked by Samagra Vedika between 2014 and 2019, often without notice; later investigations showed that "several thousands of these exclusions were done wrongfully, owing to faulty data and bad algorithmic decisions" (Tapasya et al., 2024). These mistakes fell heaviest on the poor and vulnerable. Bee, a widow from Telangana, found that officials doubted her and relied on the algorithm; her struggle exemplifies how algorithmic failures can threaten people's survival (Tapasya et al., 2024). Similar patterns played out elsewhere: at COVID vaccination or aid registration, biometric failures (e.g. fingerprint mismatches) reportedly left pregnant and older women waiting or turned away (Jose & Aishwarya, 2025).

At the same time, online education and telemedicine expanded. However, these "solutions" assumed broadband access and digital literacy, deepening a digital divide. A GSMA 2023 report noted that *31% of Indian women do not own a smartphone*, blocking access to even face-based Aadhaar auth (Jose & Aishwarya, 2025). Meanwhile, misinformation algorithms intensified panic: false health rumours or misogynistic conspiracy theories circulated widely. Scholars call this a "'gendered epidemic' of online harassment" during COVID (Dehingia et al., 2023). Although some women used apps for mutual aid or activism (e.g. fundraising for families, online legal help), these counter-narratives struggled against the overwhelming noise of hate.

In summary, COVID-19 was a "critical juncture" where existing algorithmic biases erupted into crises. Digital systems meant to fight the pandemic frequently reproduced society's sexism. In India, the pandemic thus deepened gendered vulnerabilities rather than bridging them, making it clear that women's rights must be a central concern of digital policy.

Mechanisms of Harm: From Invisible to Visible

How do hidden algorithmic biases translate into concrete harms for women? This paper identifies several overlapping mechanisms:

- **Data Bias and Representational Harm:** Algorithms learn from historical or online data, which underrepresents and stereotypes women (Noble, 2018). For instance, search results and image databases skew young, fair-skinned women for terms like "beautiful" (Bansal & Agrawal, 2025). This invisibilises older, darker, or rural women in digital culture. "As Imam and Manimekalai (2025) note, Safiya Umoja Noble found that Google often produced 'derogatory stereotypes' when searching for information about Black women." In the Indian context, limited training data on women's linguistic patterns or activities can cause AI assistants to misinterpret or exclude them. Such bias can make women's voices—and hence needs—invisible to automated systems.
- **Lack of Accountability:** Algorithms are often "black boxes." When public policies rely on opaque AI (e.g. welfare eligibility systems), those harmed have no recourse. In Telangana, even when poor women proved their status, officials "favoured the decision of the algorithm" (Tapasya et al., 2024), effectively vesting pseudo-judicial power in a machine. Feminist theory warns that the lack of transparency reproduces patriarchal authority: a woman's word is doubted unless validated by (male-authored) tech. Similarly, content moderation algorithms on social media rarely explain why a post is removed or left up. Women who are targeted by abuse can therefore be doubly disempowered: attacked online and then ignored by inscrutable system rules.
- **Amplification and Feedback Loops:** Engagement-driven algorithms amplify extreme content. As an IT for Change report notes, platform architectures and "emotive content (negative, toxic or hate-fueled content) prompt more engagement," creating a feedback loop that favours misogynistic posts (Raghavan et al., 2021). In practice, this means that sexist or violent memes about women can trend quickly. For example, once *Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai* went viral, it drew more user attention, which algorithms propagated to others. Women may find attacks disseminated so widely that the harm is irreversible. This technical amplification converts private hatred into mass harassment, with an outsized psychological impact on survivors.
- **Intersectional Targeting:** Algorithmic harms often concentrate on multiply-marginalised women. Machine translation or hate-speech detection may struggle with code-mixed or dialectic misogyny, allowing attacks that blend caste slurs and gendered insults to proliferate unchecked. Feminist and critical race theorists stress that algorithmic surveillance historically monitors marginalised bodies more intensely; in India, minorities' data may be over-policed as *Sulli Deals* and *Bulli Bai* targeted Muslim women while their complaints are minimised. Thus, algorithmic system failings exacerbate existing social cleavages.
- **Exclusionary Design and "One-Size-Fits-All" Policies:** Algorithms assume a male, urban, literate user—Aadhaar's face recognition missed women with thin brows and infants (Bansal & Agrawal, 2025). Women working in fields have "fingerprint wear and tear" that yields more mismatches (Jose & Aishwarya, 2025). Similarly, health chatbots or vaccine apps may not consider that women multitask or shift duties, leading to form dropouts when asked to input complex data. These design oversights turn 'invisible' women into 'visible' errors (denials, lockouts). The underlying flaw is treating digital tools as one-size-fits-all despite gendered experiences.
- **Reinforcement of Stereotypes:** Algorithms can project and legitimise sexist social narratives. Eubanks (2018) shows how automated welfare eligibility rules often encoded assumptions about the "deserving poor," which meant mistrusting female-headed households. In India, critics have noted that if a woman's Aadhaar profile does not match (due to a name change after marriage, etc.), an algorithm might "assume" she is ineligible. On social media, recommender systems have been documented to suggest content that aligns with a user's prejudices; a man engaging with misogynistic posts is likely to see more of the same, reinforcing his bias (Raghavan et al., 2021). Privacy models trained on patriarchal data can automatically label women as "suspicious" — for example, a married woman's late-night app use might trigger family-tracking alerts. These mechanisms show how social prejudices become baked into "objective" processes.

Opposing perspectives often praise algorithmic tools for reducing human discretion, but this analysis reveals that these tools embed old oppressions in new forms. The harm is both invisible (code bias or dataset gap) and visible (welfare benefits denied, survivors traumatised). Feminist scholars insist on *algorithmic accountability*, meaning human oversight, transparency, and design participation by women (Noble, 2018; Eubanks, 2018; Dehingia et al., 2023). Only by uncovering these invisible layers can we make harm visible and actionable.

Resistance and Counter-Narratives

Across India, women's movements and civil society are actively contesting digital misogyny. Grassroots activists have brought counter-narratives and pressure to bear on policy and industry:

- **Collective Mobilization:** India's #MeToo movement (2018) demonstrated how digital platforms could empower survivors to speak out. Although met with backlash, it also led to new networks of support (e.g., "Time's Up" groups) and dialogues about workplace harassment in tech (IT for Change, 2022). Similarly, social media campaigns by feminist collectives (e.g., *Pinjra Tod* on campus safety) use hashtags and online petitions to demand changes, building digital solidarity.
- **Legal and Policy Advocacy:** Feminist organisations are pushing for stronger regulation of online spaces. For example, civil society filed public interest litigations to challenge inadequately enforced cyber-harassment laws and demand transparency reports on content removal. Raghavan et al. (2021) have argued that existing IT rules, even when amended, lack gender balance; they call for a gender impact assessment of digital laws. Groups like Breakthrough or AltNews publish analyses of algorithmic trends to educate the public, and have advocated for "internet ethics" that respect privacy and consent (Raghavan et al., 2021).
- **Digital Literacy and Safe-Tech Initiatives:** NGOs (e.g. Sayfty, CyberPeace Foundation) train women in digital self-defence: securing accounts, reporting abuse, and verifying misinformation. Feminist hackathons and "cyber-safety for women" workshops aim to build skills. At the same time, activists are developing tools: some groups explored browser extensions or chatbots that detect and warn against hateful content, though platform algorithms often block automated scrapers.
- **Alternative Content and Counter speech:** Women journalists and bloggers are pushing back by producing gender-affirming media. For instance, independent media collectives have documented *Sulli deals* and *Bulli Bai* extensively, framing them as communal misogyny. After the 2022 online auctions, Muslim women created their own "auction" of Hindu men's grooming ads to invert the stigma, often labelled a "digital revenge" tactic. Such actions expose hate apps for what they are and create counter-publics. In parallel, feminist tech collectives work on gender-sensitive AI: for example, teams at the Web Foundation and IIIT-Hyderabad have prototyped conversational agents that avoid sexist defaults (Radhakrishnan, 2021).
- **International and UN Engagement:** Indian feminist scholars and practitioners contributed to the Beijing+30 reviews. UN Women India has hosted dialogues on tech and gender. At the same time, some women's rights groups submitted shadow reports on India's digital rights for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). These efforts emphasise that India's e-governance and ID programs must align with global commitments to women's equality.

Though resistance has been vibrant, it faces structural obstacles. Social media platforms in India often lack sufficient moderation for misogyny, citing "free speech" defences, and law enforcement is slow to address digital crimes (Dehingia et al., 2023). Moreover, women activists themselves are often attacked online for speaking out. Nonetheless, these counter-narratives are critical: they reveal that algorithms are socially constructed and thus changeable. By insisting on oversight, diverse leadership, and inclusive data, feminist actors are beginning to reshape the tech discourse.

Toward Beijing+30

As the world marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2025, it is imperative to update its vision for the digital age. The original Beijing Declaration called for removing all barriers to women's full participation in decision-making and increasing women's access to information. Today, this means gender-just technology—below are concise steps toward a feminist digital-governance framework for India:

1. **Gender Audits of Algorithms and AI Policies:** Following Beijing's principle of gender mainstreaming, the Indian government should require audits of any public-sector algorithm (e.g. for welfare, policing,

education) to detect gendered biases. Feminist experts should be on oversight boards to review AI deployments, such as government health apps or intelligent city surveillance, and ensure they do not violate women's rights. As the Tribune authors propose, any digital welfare scheme must incorporate opt-outs and human review for failures (Jose & Aishwarya, 2025).

2. **Inclusive Design and Diverse Datasets:** Tech development processes in India need feminist intervention. Policy should incentivise recruiting women and gender-diverse people in AI research and participatory design. Data collection must consciously include women's work, voices, and experiences. For instance, voice assistants and text-to-speech must be trained on women's speech samples from Indian languages. Smartphone and internet interface design should consider varied literacy levels and safety (e.g., easy emergency alerts for women and local language AI moderators). These align with a Beijing+30 call to promote women's skills in science and technology.
3. **Bridging the Digital Gender Gap:** Closing the gender divide (Beijing+30 priority) is not just about infrastructure but agency. Programs like BharatNet or public internet KIOSKs must be paired with training for women. Digital public services (e.g. health records, e-governance apps) should have gender-responsive feedback channels. UN data suggests that global GDP could rise massively if more women were online (UN Women, 2025). India could lead by targeting villages and schools: women's cooperatives could co-manage community internet centres, and ensure fair usage. At the same time, data privacy must be a legal right (aligned with Beijing's "protection from violence" goal): India's draft data protection law should be strengthened to explicitly safeguard women's health and personal data (Imam & Manimekalai, 2025).
4. **Regulating Platform Violence:** Online violence against women must be treated as a public health and human rights crisis. The IT Act and rules should explicitly define and penalise misogynistic hate speech and image-based abuse. Platforms should be mandated to remove doxxing and non-consensual pornography rapidly, with gender-sensitive moderators. Civil society groups should be empowered to report abuses (as Beijing+30 action frameworks emphasise), and support helplines must be given resources to counsel victims of online stalking or harassment. Importantly, this legislation must avoid "instrumentalising offense" (Raghavan et al., 2021): laws should differentiate malicious attacks from legitimate feminist speech about religion or politics, preventing dominant groups from silencing marginal voices via "hurt sentiments" claims.
5. **Gender-Responsive Data Governance.** Building on Beijing's aim to place women at the heart of economic decision-making, women's representation is needed in bodies that govern digital data. India's UIDAI and Digital India programs should include feminist advisors to prevent "mission creep" (Dixon, 2017). Public data trusts or citizen juries could decide state access to personal data; in welfare contexts, the *do no harm* rule should bar sharing biometric data of pregnant women or refugees across unrelated databases — a lesson from Rwanda's ethnic data catastrophe (Dixon, 2017). Rather than perpetuate invisibility, "algorithmic governance" must intentionally increase participation parity for women (Bansal & Agrawal, 2025), for example, by designing benefits delivery with community verification.

These strategies must be tied to broader feminist economics and governance. Beijing+30 renewal platforms emphasise six key actions, one being "bridging the digital gender gap." Indian policy-makers can implement this by formally recognising gender digital exclusion as a development indicator and setting targets. Civil society can help monitor compliance through shadow reports. Educational curricula (another Beijing+30 focus) should include digital citizenship and rights awareness for girls, while ICT degree programs should aim for 50% women enrolment. Significantly, technology itself should be democratised: open-source feminist tech hubs could build apps that cater to women's needs rather than solely to market logics.

A feminist reworking of digital governance can help the technology be turned into a tool for achieving equality. The Beijing Platform spoke about women being full participants in the information revolution and how sad it was that thirty years later, the digital revolution left many women behind or harmed them. Conversely, feminist scholarship and activism provide a blueprint: technologies can be redesigned to empower rather than exclude. Algorithmic systems should at least begin to consider the lived realities of women and recognise their rights. With adequate pressure and visionary policy, India can move from invisible biases to visible justice so that by Beijing+30, no woman's fate will be determined by an unchecked algorithm.

Conclusion

India's experience with digital governance, from welfare using Aadhaar to social media platforms, is a stark reminder that algorithms hold inherent biases and translate into concrete impacts on women. As the study shows, these biases are based on patriarchal data and decision-making rules that become dramatically harmful in crises like COVID-19. The trio of welfare exclusion, escalating online misogyny, and precarious platform work reveals the myth of technological neutrality: absent intervention, technology often reproduces gendered disadvantages. However, this is not inevitable. Feminist interventions from digital literacy campaigns to demands for algorithmic accountability are already resisting; Beijing+30 is an interesting blueprint for change.

To make digital inclusion a reality, India must adopt *feminist digital governance*: auditing algorithms for gender bias, reforming AI policies with women's input, and enforcing online and offline rights. Only then can the invisible logics of code be translated into policies of visibility and justice. As Beijing+30 urges the world to "turn words into action," Indian policymakers, technologists, and activists must ensure that algorithms protect women's rights, rather than violate them. In sum, addressing algorithmic misogyny is not peripheral but central to achieving gender equality in the information age.

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