

Digital media and feminist activism: Reclaiming inclusive urban spaces in the post-digital era

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Abstract

This article examines the role of digital media in urban feminist activism, highlighting how activists utilize digital platforms to challenge patriarchal norms and practices, promote gender equality, and foster inclusive spaces for marginalised voices in urban contexts. At the intersection of feminism, technology, and urban development, this study aims to understand how digital media can contribute to identifying exclusionary practices and disparities while advocating the promotion of inclusive urban spaces that reflect the diverse needs and experiences of citizens, with a particular focus on women. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore the use of digital media for various types of mobilisation and support networks. It is based on a theoretical framework that addresses themes of digital citizenship, feminism, and urban studies, contextualised in various projects and digital initiatives of feminist activists. Examples of digital activism, such as the #NiUnaMenos, #MeToo, and "Woman, Life, Freedom" movements, are presented to demonstrate the reach of digital platforms in raising awareness, mobilising collective action, and pushing for social and legislative change. "Free to Be" and "Her City Toolbox" are presented as examples of how digital tools for collaborative digital mapping can collect data, empower participants and inform decision-making processes to create inclusive urban spaces. The final notes underscore the significance of digital empowerment in expanding opportunities to identify and address systemic barriers, exploring various forms of communication, and promoting active participation in urban processes, ultimately envisioning the co-creation of cities that value diversity, equity, and accessibility..

Keywords: feminist digital citizenship, inclusive urban spaces, digital media, participatory processes, post-digital, gender equality

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1. Introduction

Adopting participatory strategies that involve and represent diverse urban actors in public participation and community engagement processes is essential for effective urban planning (Semeraro *et al.*, 2020).

However, women continue to face several challenges that restrict their full public participation. One major limiting factor is the lack of time and availability, resulting from the overload of responsibilities beyond professional working hours. The persistence of patriarchal social norms and practices continues to be reproduced daily by men and women. This is a widespread problem worldwide, as demonstrated by the United Nations Development Programme report (2023), the Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI). Breaking Down Gender Biases Shifting social norms towards gender equality, which measures how social beliefs obstruct gender equality. This report, which represents 85% of the world's population, revealed that "close to 9 out of 10 men and women have some biases against women".

The burden of domestic and care work, whether for ascendants or descendants, falls disproportionately on women (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019), resulting in mental and physical overload. Managing the demands of work and family life, the incompatibility of the schedules of many actions proposed by institutions makes public participation challenging. The combination of these challenges results in low involvement of women in participatory decision-making processes (Rampaul & Magidimisha-Chipungu, 2022), which, theoretically, should enable them to exercise their desired expression and equality of opportunities.

As a result, institutional responses often do not meet the needs of women's urban practices and living conditions (Falú, 2022). Thus, patriarchal social relations, norms, and practices still significantly restrict women's presence in public spaces, creating systems of inequality, exclusion, and marginalisation. The feeling of insecurity and harassment on the streets continues to restrict many women from specific paths and access to many public spaces (Sharma, 2020), which limits their right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2008).

The post-digital era is characterised by the presence of technology in everyday life in an integrated and ubiquitous way in everyday practices (Escaño, 2023), unquestionably and imperceptibly, where digital and physical planes are complementary layers of a single continuous reality. Shapley (2011) characterised the post-digital era as the fusion of digital and physical, where digital technologies increasingly mediate everyday practices, social dynamics, and urban processes. This context has changed the ways of being, doing, living, and learning, which are reflected in the interactions and practices in urban spaces. These processes emphasise the importance of digital literacy, which should be supported by accessible and user-friendly forms of public engagement to promote inclusion and encourage citizen participation. This approach is essential for consistently advocating and promoting human rights that are practised and respected. Boa Sorte & Vicentini (2020) emphasised the need for social justice literacy, highlighting the persistent influence of digital technologies on educational and social practices.

Pérez & Sanz (2021) emphasised the importance of focusing on human involvement in the digital context, stressing that technology should be viewed as a tool to enhance human interaction, rather than an end in itself. Digital media has the potential to enable public participation. In the last decades, there has been a significant increase in the use of digital platforms to address issues such as gender bias, patriarchy, violence against women, stereotypes, inclusion, and sexuality. However, tools capable of effectively and operatively connecting the dimensions of digitisation, participation, and interaction are lacking (De Siqueira *et al.*, 2022). These tools should enable the alignment of community and place creation with civic responsibility and citizenship, thereby encouraging citizen participation and fostering a sense of belonging within the community (Alevizou, 2020).

As such, this article examines the role of digital media in urban feminist activism. In this context, the question arises: How are feminist activists in urban environments using digital media platforms to challenge patriarchal norms in urban contexts, promote gender equality, and create inclusive spaces for marginalised voices?

To this end, the study adopted an interdisciplinary approach to reflect on how different digital

media enable new and different forms of expression, mobilisation, and network building. It also investigates the intersections between different spaces (online and offline, digital and physical) in sharing women's experiences and opportunities for civic participation in the cities they inhabit. Digital media can enhance and hinder women's participation in addressing systemic and structural inequalities in urban life. On the one hand, digital platforms offer women opportunities to mobilise and participate, enabling them to overcome barriers such as time constraints, limited mobility, and a lack of confidence in expressing their views publicly. However, we are witnessing new challenges, including the perpetuation of inequalities and the rise of misogynistic practices and online discrimination (Galpin, 2022; Barker & Jurasz, 2019). This duality highlights the necessity for an intersectional critical analysis of inequalities in urban spaces. This study approaches the concept of "inclusion" alongside "intersectionality" through a feminist lens that critiques sexist and exclusionary practices, particularly in urban contexts. This approach acknowledges the different forms of oppression that intersect in women's experiences while emphasising the importance of amplifying marginalised voices and integrating perspectives that address the diverse and specific needs of women (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; hooks, 1984, 2019). Intersectionality is central to the two projects to be analysed, as it acknowledges that gender experiences in urban spaces are shaped by overlapping identities, such as race, class, age, sexual orientation, and other social constraints.

In terms of methods, this research includes an interdisciplinary review of the existing literature on digital citizenship, feminism, and urban studies. This was followed by an analysis of two projects and digital mapping initiatives undertaken by feminist activists to understand how digital media can facilitate female participation and promote inclusive urban spaces. These projects were selected based on their role in gathering data and visualising information, raising awareness of gender-related urban challenges, and advocating social change and public policies.

2. Feminist (post)digital citizenship: a conceptual approach with practical ground

Farmer (2011) defined digital citizenship as the ability to use technology safely, responsibly, critically, and productively, with a significant amount of knowledge about digital society. In a hyperconnected world, digital citizenship is a core competence and fundamental skill set that includes ethical behaviour, media literacy, active digital participation, and the ability to use technology critically (Suphattanakul *et al.*, 2023).

Sladkova and Bashir (2022) emphasise how the digital divide directly relates to gender inequalities. This digital gender divide, made visible and amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, has highlighted the need to pay attention to the needs of women and girls, while guaranteeing that digital transformation does not exclude them.

In this context, feminist digital citizenship refers to the practice of active involvement and resistance by women in digital spaces against exclusionary practices that aim to promote gender equality and inclusive environments. It was initially driven by historical struggles for equal rights, autonomy, and social justice, which are currently being transferred to digital space.

Feminist digital citizenship may, thus, increase women's participation in democratic processes by using digital tools and platforms. It may address issues related to practices and norms that trigger and replicate actions of marginalisation, oppression, and gender imbalances, which often make urban spaces unsafe and exclusionary for women (Fernandez, Cruz & Morgan, 2020).

Foth, Brynskov & Ojala (2015) address citizens' rights to the digital city, emphasising the role of urban interfaces, activism, and placemaking in promoting inclusion and active participation.

Henry, Vasil & Witt (2022) add the concept of digital citizenship as a status (being a digital citizen) with practice (acting as a digital citizen) and an intersubjective experience (occupying the liminal space of citizenship). They highlighted that a feminist approach to digital citizenship can address gender subordination and exclusionary practices in digital societies, promoting a feminist democratic project centred on intersectionality and status.

Integrating feminist perspectives into digital development, as mentioned in the EU Gender Action

Plan (European Commission, 2020), emphasises the importance of a value-based digital partnership to ensure a fair and inclusive digital transformation (Culp, 2015). The development and growth of various social networks and digital media provide activist movements with real-time means of communication that reach a vast global audience, allowing the fast circulation of information and coordination of events, and giving greater visibility, significantly expanding the impact of their actions. It also allows for the creation and development of international, intercultural, intersectional, and interdisciplinary support and solidarity networks. These networks promote the sharing of experiences and challenges, which, although local, are discussed and recognised globally, enabling the co-creation of historical counter-narratives. As such, digital tools and media can facilitate more active and equal participation in urban governance, allowing historically marginalised voices to be heard. These actions are crucial for recognising and understanding oppression, as well as resisting patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender inequality in urban settings.

Indeed, Peake (2016) highlights the importance of a feminist perspective on the production of knowledge about urban areas, underscoring the need for feminist intervention in global urban studies. The author also emphasises the need for urban studies that consider the practices of everyday social and political struggles, as well as women's needs and desires, to promote a more inclusive and democratic understanding of cities. By addressing the socio-spatial implications of urban life mediated by platforms and media, digital activism can foster the collaborative reimagining of "other" urban spaces. It may integrate social and digital processes into the practice of creating and resignifying these places. Vegh (2003) identified three dimensions of digital activism: awareness and advocacy, organisation and mobilisation, and action and reaction. These dimensions emphasise the importance of women's digital citizenship for civic participation in the collective thinking of urban spaces, reconfiguring gender dynamics and making them more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all citizens.

Nonetheless, social, cultural, economic, and political factors still limit women's civic participation. Factors such as gender prejudices, stereotypes, restrictive social and cultural norms, limited mobility, domestic responsibilities, overload of care-related activities, and limited free time continue to limit women's active participation in civic activities. Therefore, social networks and digital media can connect dispersed voices with common causes. By providing spaces for sharing experiences and information, digital media contribute to building social capital (Mandarano *et al.*, 2010), which is essential for strengthening communities. However, it is essential to develop digital literacy skills to broaden the scope of civic engagement and ensure that marginalised voices can express themselves in a way that can be heard and represented in decision-making processes (Pérez-delHoyo, Mora & Paredes, 2018).

3. Digital feminist placemaking: crossing concepts with urban studies

The potential of digital media to promote social change and the democratic processes of (co)creation spaces and new forms of community and solidarity is constantly evolving as new technologies emerge. The concept of placemaking, which refers to the process of community development and the creation of quality urban spaces that contribute to the health, happiness, and well-being of citizens, when combined with feminist principles, has become a tool for addressing issues such as gender inequality, accessibility, and representation in physical and digital environments.

The genesis of feminist digital placemaking is based on actions to denounce and resist the vast numbers of sexual violence and femicides, as well as feminist geography and urban planning, emphasising the importance of considering gender and other social factors in the design and use of spaces.

Pérez & Sanz (2021) highlighted that digital feminist placemaking should be understood as a practice that combines digital technologies with community mobilisation and participation to transform urban spaces.

Wahyudi & Elanda (2023) link gender mainstreaming policies with the development of smart cities to ensure that urban life is fair, inclusive, and actively involves women in city growth and decision-making processes. Incorporating a gender perspective into sustainable urban innovation is essential

for fostering equitable and inclusive solutions that cater to the diverse needs of all citizens (Schulders, 2022). This approach ensures that women and other marginalised groups have equal access to urban resources and opportunities, leading to more inclusive and representative solutions.

Mehan (2024) defines the concept of Digital Feminist Placemaking as a form of feminist insurgency that uses digital tools, such as digital art, graffiti and online protest movements, to create spaces for female solidarity and resistance.

4. Digital media for feminist activism: hashtags, networks and social mobilisation for protest

The integration of digital technologies has played a transformative role in feminist activism, facilitating mobilisation, raising awareness on a large scale, and promoting new forms of civic participation. Digital technologies also enable the creation of safe and inclusive discussion spaces where women can share experiences, denounce abuses and formulate collective strategies to confront violence and discrimination. This collective strength and digital empowerment have been instrumental in pushing for political and social change.

Digital activism practices significantly influence social perceptions, leveraging the expansive reach and interactive nature of digital platforms to shape public discourse and mobilise collective action. Social media platforms like X and Facebook facilitate rapid information dissemination, allowing activists to raise awareness and interact with a broader audience, changing public attitudes and behaviours. Digital activism also fosters a sense of community and collective identity, particularly among young people and marginalised groups, thereby enhancing their involvement in social and political causes. This new digital landscape has inspired novel forms of activist expression, challenged dominant narratives and claimed the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991) and public presence through everyday actions and symbolic resistance. In Pakistan in 2015, Sadia Khatri posted a photo of herself in a *dhaba* (roadside café) and started the movement with the hashtag #girlsatdhabas. The main intention was to challenge social norms that restrict women's access to and presence in public spaces in Pakistan. Occupying traditionally male-dominated spaces, such as *dhabas*, she challenged social norms and empowered women to assert their presence and participation in public spheres. Through selfies and narratives shared with a hashtag on social media to document and share their experiences, participants claim their right to occupy urban spaces safely and equally (Liu *et al.*, 2017). This movement empowered many women to claim their right to occupy public spaces without fear, emphasising the need for inclusive environments for diverse gender identities. #GirlsAtDhabas demands the rights of women's bodies in public urban spaces and exemplifies how digital activism can challenge masculine and patriarchal socio-spatial logic and practices. Through digital media such as Instagram and X, participants have raised societal awareness and pushed for cultural and legislative changes that promote women's safety and inclusion. By claiming public urban spaces and challenging traditional gender roles, the participants demonstrated the social impact that the power of collective action and digital activism can achieve.

The #NiUnaMenos movement, which emerged in Argentina in 2015, uses hashtags to amplify its protest against gender violence and femicide. The hashtag #NiUnaMenos has become a symbol of resistance and solidarity, calling for mobilisation to demand an end to violence against women (De Maio, 2023). The use of social media has enabled the international mobilisation of various protests and made data and narratives visible in the media. At the time, one of the impacts of this movement resulted in the creation of a new Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity, which runs a helpline for victims of violence and works towards changing behaviour through education campaigns.

#NiUnaMenos demonstrated the power of cyberactivism by using digital platforms to organise massive protests, amplify marginalised voices, and push for legislative and social changes. By transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, #NiUnaMenos extensively used digital platforms (X, Facebook, and Instagram) to unite and mobilise people worldwide, creating a network of solidarity and resistance against gender-based violence. Through hashtags, online campaigns, and coordinated protests, the movement articulated actions both in the digital space and on the streets, allowing marginalised voices to be heard and demanding justice and inclusion to be amplified. The hashtag #NiUnaMenos united voices worldwide in a global campaign, resulting in

massive demonstrations that made visible an issue often neglected by public policies and society. This campaign mobilised millions of people in Latin America and worldwide, creating a network of support and solidarity among women.

Another important movement was the #MeToo movement, created by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 in the United States. However, it was not until 2017 that the movement gained international repercussions when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women around the world to share their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse by using the #MeToo hashtag in support of the accusations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. Within the first 24 hours of the #MeToo movement, half a million women shared their experiences.

These initiatives have brought unprecedented visibility to gender injustice and violence, contributing to global awareness and collective mobilisation against the culture of silence and impunity (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019; Quan-Haase, 2021). Through the #MeToo movement, digital platforms have allowed victims' stories to be shared worldwide, creating a domino effect in various industries, using social media to give victims a voice and hold perpetrators accountable (Steele, 2021), which has led to the creation of policies and initiatives against sexual harassment in various organisations and institutions.

These movements on digital platforms have given visibility to their causes and inspired different protest and solidarity actions worldwide. In 2022, the death of Mahsa Jina Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman, shocked and revolted the world. After being arrested for not covering her hair properly, young Mahsa died in the custody of the 'morality police'. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement arose in protest to challenge traditional power structures and mobilise international support against the lack of human rights for Iranian women and girls, as well as political oppression (Mehan, 2024). This movement, a call for international aid, represented Iranian women's struggle for freedom, dignity, and fundamental human rights, such as access to education, and public spaces. Through digital media, Iranian women resist the government's imposed limitations, amplify their voices, and claim public spaces, physical and virtual, to promote social and political change. The contribution of digital media has been crucial in enabling Iranian women to organise, share their stories, and mobilise protests worldwide. This movement continues to unveil individual narratives of resistance and empowerment, contributing to a broader and stronger discourse on gender equality in Iran (Mehan, 2024). As part of this movement, the photographic exhibition "Woman Life Freedom," created by Fedra Fateh, premiered at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival in May 2024. The exhibition celebrates the creativity and courage of 15 Iranian women artists who have faced censorship and fought for freedom of expression and equal rights.

Despite the potential for feminist expression and the different tools and ways that digital activism offers, these online environments have simultaneously evolved into places where feminists confront significant challenges. On the one hand, ongoing technological development has facilitated the exploration of new digital tools for feminist activism, enabling new actions and strengthening support networks for various causes. However, some social media platforms, particularly Instagram, X and TikTok, have increasingly become hostile environments, allowing new forms of misogynistic oppression.

The UN Women (UNWomen.org) organisation and the United Nations report (A/79/500, December 30, 2022), entitled "Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls", highlighted the urgency of intensify efforts to eliminate all forms of violence, with special attention to the recent growth of violence facilitated by technology. The perpetuation of misogynistic practices, hate speech and gender-based violence has increasingly spread beyond physical contexts, as there has been an increase in different forms of abuse, now also at the digital level. This includes, for instance, doxing, which involves the public disclosure of personal information to threaten, intimidate, or silence individuals, as well as trolling, characterised by systematic attacks employing sexist, discriminatory, and misogynistic language. Most of the time, these actions are carried out by anonymous profiles or usernames that makes it impossible to identify the aggressor. These online insults put the physical and psychological integrity of activists at risk. They attempted to ridicule and devalue the collective and networking work that has been built concerning human rights and gender equality, thus threatening digital activism, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to civic participation for more inclusive societies.

Journalist and activist Irantzu Varela, in an interview on May 6, 2024 with the Efeminista portal of the EFE AGENCY, S.A.¹, a Spanish international news agency, reflected on this structural violence. Irantzu Varela (2024) in her book *Lo que quede*, a feminist influencer with visibility and impact in digital media, reflected and shared the insults and threats received online. In the same interview, the activist pointed out that violence against feminist women with a strong online presence and visibility is not a one-off case but rather part of a structural system that requires organisation, solidarity, active resistance and collective responses.

The use of crowdsourced data collection to map urban spaces based on perceptions of safety and inclusivity, particularly from the perspective of young women and girls, is examined in the subsequent section. These projects empower participants to identify areas where they feel unsafe or unwelcome, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the urban challenges related to gender and safety. By visualising these perceptions through collective and participatory tools, these projects can inform policymakers and urban studies, fostering more inclusive spaces.

5. Feminist locative media: Analysing spatial gender inequalities through collaborative digital mapping

In view of Kalms' (2018) argument that crowd-mapping constitutes a powerful form of feminist activism insofar as it challenges traditional male hegemony in the production of knowledge about the city and the design of its infrastructures, we will present two instances of this approach.

The visibility of vulnerabilities and problems pinpointed in the territory enables the identification of inequalities and an understanding of the socio-spatial logics that cause them. Therefore, decision-making authorities must prioritise the collection of data disaggregated by gender and other intersectional criteria to implement urban policies that guarantee the safety and inclusion of women in urban spaces.

Locative media combines geolocation data with mobile communications, showcasing how digital technologies facilitate meaningful exchanges and interactions. Digital mapping has been an effective method for generating detailed knowledge about participants' experiences.

5.1 Free to Be, a digital crowd-mapping

"Free to Be"² is a collaborative mapping project launched in five major cities: Delhi (India), Lima (Peru), Sydney (Australia), Madrid (Spain), and Kampala (Uganda). It was developed by Plan International in collaboration with Monash University's XYX Lab and CrowdSpot.

The mapping was done over six weeks in 2018, followed by reflection workshops to analyse the results more accurately. This interactive mapping tool enables young women and girls aged 18 to 30 to participate without fear of recrimination. The main objective was to understand girls and young women's perceptions of their safety when walking in their cities. It examined how, where, and when the fear of violence and harassment affects their daily activities and the long-term implications of these restrictions and intimidation for their future.

The project recognised the participants' urban experiences as a form of situated and fundamental knowledge to inform political decision-makers and technicians of decision-making institutions about the spatial challenges and injustices that women face on a daily basis.

The areas they liked best were marked as "good" with a purple pin, and the "bad" areas, where they felt unsafe, were marked with an orange pin. At the same time, they described their experiences in these places. During the mapping process, several individual testimonies were gathered and mapped in aggregated and visually accessible urban data on an interactive map, resulting in a diagnostic tool that allows for the identification of critical areas in the city and makes visible recurrent patterns of

¹ <https://efeminista.com/irantzu-varela-libro-lo-que-queda/>

² <https://www.plan.org.au/you-can-help/join-the-movement-for-girls-rights/free-to-be/>

exclusion and spatial vulnerability associated with gender.

The anonymity provided by the initial questionnaire, which was then incorporated into the digital collaborative mapping allowed participants to feel safe sharing their experiences, without the embarrassment and fear of being judged associated with formal reporting channels.

To ensure a safe environment for participants and to guarantee the importance of the data quality control process, the project team highlighted the necessity of eliminating several reports of trolling and false data, particularly in the case of Madrid. For this reason, the project team made another recommendation to ensure the collection of important and reliable data: combining different and complementary methods of participation, such as discussion groups and workshops, as carried out in the five cities.

The “Free to Be” project’s recruitment methods, particularly the direct recruitment from the streets in Delhi and Kampala, helped reduce trolling; however, they also potentially compromised anonymity and sincerity. The project revealed that despite cultural and geographical differences, experiences of violence and sexual harassment are a common occurrence among women, especially young women, in the five cities under analysis.

The State of the World’s Girls Report. *Unsafe in the City: The Everyday Experiences of Girls and Young Women*” (Plan International, 2018) emphasises that harassment and abuse occur in various contexts and at different times, challenging the notion that women’s insecurity is confined to nighttime hours. It underscores the necessity of transforming male behaviour and societal attitudes toward harassment. The report advocates for public campaigns led by young women, increased participation of women in decision-making processes, and the establishment of safe spaces in public areas. Another recommendation from the same report is for municipal authorities to prioritise gathering data disaggregated by gender and other criteria to accurately quantify the levels of abuse and implement policies that guarantee the safety and inclusion of women in urban spaces.

The actions carried out by the “Free to Be” project gathered and presented important data, triggered new actions, and empowered participants to actively intervene and express their needs. Plan International also provides another platform, the Youth Activist Series, to ensure that the voices of girls and young women are heard. One case to point out is Alice Rummery, who participated in the co-design of “Free to be” Sydney and became a Plan International Youth Activist in 2018³. In an interview, she stated that the experience was empowering and transformative. When the project “Free to Be” was launched, she wrote an opinion article published in the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper on April 16, 2018, entitled “I’m a walking target for men on our city’s streets”⁴. In this online opinion article, Alice Rummery shared her daily experience of street harassment, as she mentioned: “This had a huge impact on me - by openly sharing my own experience, I created a conversation much bigger than I could have imagined. It proved to me how valuable girls’ experiences are and how we can make waves when we speak out. In addition, I was able to draw attention to the issue of street harassment by participating in programmes such as Sunrise, Al Jazeera, The Project, 2GB radio, TEN News, SBS Viceland and BuzzFeed. Girls and young women have been speaking out about street harassment for years, but the database needed to help decision-makers understand and respond to this issue has been lacking.”

The “Free to Be” platform was made available for about six weeks in each city. The project was promoted in every city through reports, social media campaigns, and media coverage. And allowed to systematically visualise and compare patterns of violence and exclusion shared by women in different urban contexts. Within this project, another important contribution developed by Plan International was the “REPORT: State of the World’s Girls: Free to be online?”⁵ from 2020. For this report, 14,000 girls from 32 countries were interviewed about their online experiences, yielding alarming statistics. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from 16 and 22 countries. More than half of the girls were harassed and abused on social media. In 22 countries, girls faced exposure to explicit messages, pornographic photos, cyberstalking, and various forms of abuse. Most frequently, girls were confronted with abusive and insulting language, reported by more

3 <https://www.plan.org.au/news/youth/free-to-be-a-youth-activists-reflection/>

4 <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/i-m-a-walking-target-for-men-on-our-city-s-streets-20180416-p4z9ul.html>

5 <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/06/SOTWGR2020-CommsReport-edition2023-EN.pdf>

than half (59%), followed by deliberate embarrassment (41%), body shaming and threats of sexual violence (39%). This report presents data that highlights the correlation between online and physical harassment, stressing that the root of the problem is the failure of society as a whole to value and guarantee gender equality.

Women and young people recognise the parallel between online harassment (digital level) and the aggression they face on the streets, at home, at school, and at work (physical level). Online harassment, although less visible, is just as severe and has a profound adverse impact on the mental health of those affected, often leading to self-isolation.

The report also recommends that social media companies, governments, and civil society create more efficient reporting mechanisms, moderate content more strictly, and hold aggressors accountable. It also reinforces the need to raise awareness about online and offline gender-based violence and ensure that laws and policies protect all women, taking into account their diverse identities and intersectional characteristics. The safety, possibilities, and challenges between physical and digital spaces are intrinsically (and increasingly) intertwined. The impediments and restrictions women encounter when accessing physical or digital spaces lead to exclusion and hinder their ability to obtain an education, secure employment opportunities, achieve financial independence, participate in social and cultural endeavours, and be included in professional and social networks.

5.2 Her City Toolbox for participatory public space planning

Her City Toolbox⁶, developed by UN-Habitat, is a digital platform that brings together global best practices in participatory urban planning, focusing on the perspectives of girls and young women. Her City Toolbox is a joint initiative between UN-Habitat and the Shared City Foundation, funded by Sida, Global Utmaning, and the Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova), with contributions from the Block by Block Foundation, White Architects, the Swedish Union of Tenants, and MethodKit. The initiative was launched in 2017 and considered girls and young women as specialists in their own spatial experiences, holders of practical and lived knowledge that allowed them to deconstruct narratives historically replicated by patriarchal societies. The underlying premise is that when planning the city for girls, it will work better for everyone, as they tend to design spaces with a greater diversity of uses and that respond to the different needs of various users. It aimed to map methods and tools that promote equality and inclusion in urban development. The methodology integrates the measurement and mapping of public spaces, security auditing, and the conduct of participatory workshops, incorporating both digital and material tools to meet intersectional processes and diverse cultural contexts. The toolbox methodology of the 'Her City' project is a structured and digitally accessible, step-by-step guide designed to help cities plan, design, and implement urban development in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

Her City Toolbox comprises nine building blocks and offers digital guidance on co-planning cities from the perspective of girls and young women. It facilitates an ongoing dialogue between professionals and citizens, providing guidance, tools and a digital platform for implementing projects. Her City Toolbox is divided into three phases: assessment, design, and implementation. Each block leads through detailed steps with digital tools such as checklists, calendars, agendas, manuals, forms, surveys, and visualisation services that help achieve the expected results. The step-by-step sequence enables all participants to feel heard and understand the basic logic behind the design of their projects, thereby making them more inclusive (Fabre et al., 2023).

The report, "Her City – 5 years impact report"⁷, 2023, indicated that the project had registered more than 1,070 individual accounts, covering approximately 350 cities in 100 countries and generating over 300 independent initiatives based on its methodology. According to the same report, the Her City project reached over 7,000,000 people through social media, web, publications, and broadcasts. It organised and participated in 60 events with 5,000 participants, built the capacity of 600 participants in 27 training sessions, and engaged over 2,800 people in the implementation of 13 partnership projects.

⁶ <https://hercity.unhabitat.org/>

⁷ https://hercity.org/app/uploads/2023/02/Her-City-_5-years-impact_report-Feb-2023.pdf

Elin Andersdotter Fabre (UN-Habitat) and Tove Levonen (Shared City Foundation), in an interview for the “Buildings and Cities”⁸ journal on October 22 2023, emphasised that young women and girls prioritise using public resources to address cross-cutting issues, privileging sustainable solutions that improve the collective well-being of people and the environment.

Some suggested actions were increased arts provision, public recreational spaces, and increased public facilities such as drinking water taps, public toilets, pedestrianised streets, cycle paths, and waste and recycling facilities.

The project revealed increased trust among young girls in societal institutions and public authorities, as well as greater civic involvement.

6. Discussion

Projects such as Free to Be and Her City Toolbox have demonstrated how collective digital mappings can be mobilised to expose and intervene in gender inequalities that occur daily in urban spaces. The two projects developed interoperability between digital platforms with offline participatory methodologies, such as workshops, interviews, and exploratory walks, allowing a systematic collection of the diverse experiences of girls and women in urban spaces.

Another noteworthy feature is the methodology, which adapts to the audience, whether digital or face-to-face. They also maintain a strong presence in media and social networks, grounded in the principles of digital feminist activism. Initiatives such as MeToo and Girls at Dhabas challenge patriarchal social norms in urban spaces and underscore the importance of practices that leverage social networks for global awareness and mobilisation (Mendes *et al.*, 2019). However, they extend beyond the reporting process by offering structured participatory planning actions and political advocacy tools supported by empirical data.

The project's methodology incorporates the principles of intersectionality, recognising that women's urban experience is mediated by multiple social markers of difference, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, and, in this sense, promotes a situated and plural reading of the territory (Mehan, 2024).

Both projects, Free to Be and Her City Toolbox, materialise a feminist approach to territory, in which the subjective, situated, and intersectional experiences of women constitute the central axis for rethinking the ways of planning, designing, and intervening in public spaces. By transforming individual urban experiences into collective mappings, the two projects carried out a process of countermapping. Data collection from different geographies highlights the globalised nature of gender-based violence in urban spaces. This collective consciousness reinforced the potential of the collective mapping tool as a digital space for sharing and listening, driving actions of collaborative activism and feminist spatial justice.

The two proposed projects emphasised critical collaborative mapping methods as tools for claiming inclusive public spaces by combining digital technologies and actions in physical urban spaces. They recognise the importance of hybrid, complementary, digital, and face-to-face actions such as urban walks and workshops. These approaches are situated at the convergence of technology, urban co-creation, digital activism, gender, and spatial justice.

Her City Toolbox project employs a bottom-up approach to community engagement, promoting the construction of a sense of place through collaborative mapping. By facilitating actions that consider girls and women as experts in their own spaces, the Her City Toolbox project acts in a more structured manner, goes beyond identifying urban fragilities and socio-spatial oppression, and proposes suggestions for the co-creation of more inclusive urban spaces and dialogue with decision-making entities.

⁸ <https://www.buildingsandcities.org/insights/commentaries/designing-cities-girls.html>

7. Conclusions

The exclusion of women from public spaces, whether digital or physical, deprives them of opportunities that the city offers, such as education, training, financial freedom, and networks of contacts and support. The collaborative mapping processes covered in this study questioned and challenged the social norms that limit women's access to public spaces by documenting and claiming their right to be there without fear or restrictions.

This article explored the role of digital media in urban feminist activism and its potential to challenge patriarchal norms, promote gender equality, and create more inclusive urban spaces, while also acknowledging challenges and emphasising the need for inclusive, intersectional approaches that combine online and offline strategies.

Women's digital activism promotes collective strength through online interactions and collaboration. It employs different media, such as forums, social networks, collaborative mapping, and mobile apps, among others, to empower and support women and young girls speaking up, particularly when they feel intimidated or discouraged from speaking in public. These are spaces of support and global female solidarity that allow stories of violence, survival, and resistance to be shared and heard. They break the silence and invisibility historically imposed by patriarchal structures and offer spaces for counter-narratives and new narratives that value women's voices and experiences. Digital media have become essential in deconstructing traditional gender roles and mobilising and creating women's networks to challenge existing power dynamics and facilitate women's participation in urban life (Losh *et al.*, 2016).

The two collective digital mapping projects, 'Free to Be' and 'Her City Toolbox,' have developed structured methodologies and tools for digital mapping and collaborative data collection, empowering young girls and women to identify unsafe areas in cities and inform municipal policymakers and technicians. These approaches recognise women as experts in their own spatial experiences and holders of situated knowledge that is fundamental to creating safer urban spaces that correspond to identified needs and are more inclusive and gender sensitive. Digital collaborative mapping platforms have enabled the mapping of experiences and situated knowledge.

The visibility of vulnerabilities and problems pinpointed in the territory enables the identification of inequalities and an understanding of the socio-spatial logics that cause them. Therefore, decision-making authorities must prioritise the collection of data disaggregated by gender and other intersectional criteria to implement urban policies that guarantee the safety and inclusion of women in urban spaces.

The post-digital era presents new technological opportunities that enable innovative forms of civic participation and knowledge production. However, it is essential to combine digital tools with offline participatory methods to ensure an inclusive engagement. It is also essential that they allow to reflect the intersectional aspects of women's urban experiences and recognise and respond to multiple forms of oppression that cross the social, economic, and cultural contexts of the participants. In this context, the need to explore asynchronous forms of digital communication and intersectional collaborative participation is highlighted as a key element of truly inclusive urban co-creation practices.

In March 2023, the 67th annual United Nations Commission⁹ on the Status of Women (CSW67) had as its theme "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls." This event highlighted the importance of digital inclusion and literacy as key factors for the well-being and success of women and girls, facilitating new ways of learning, socialising, and working.

However, violence, hate speech, harassment, social exclusion, and inequalities present in the physical world are also perpetuated digitally, often anonymously, and most of the times without repercussions. Meaningful change requires policies that address systemic and structural barriers, such as economic, social, and cultural inequalities, which limit women's full participation in their cities. Developing skills in feminist digital citizenship is essential for empowering active and safe participation in urban life.

⁹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en>

The interdependence of digital and territorial citizenship presents challenges, but also opportunities to collaboratively create cities that respect diversity, equity, and accessibility, leading to inclusive and socially responsible urban environments. Consequently, it is crucial to develop accessible and adaptable methods to encourage the participation of women, especially those most at risk, in the collective generation of data on gender disparities in urban areas. These initiatives should integrate technology with critical pedagogy, digital empowerment, community mediation, and a sustained institutional commitment to establishing the structural conditions that enable women to express themselves, navigate, and co-create safely within the context of the post-digital era. Future research should explore new forms of asynchronous digital communication and intersectional collaborative participation to inform the practice of co-creating cities that reflect the diverse voices and experiences of citizens.

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Conflicts of interest

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