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Research Article

DIGITAL COLONIALISM AND THE PATRIARCHAL DIVISION OF LABOUR: RECLAIMING MARXIST FEMINISM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY ECONOMY

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A R T I C L E I N F O	ABSTRACT
	This study argues that Marxist feminism remains essential for understanding gender inequality in the 21st-century digital economy. Mainstream debates often focus on stereotypes and access to technology, overlooking the deeper economic structures that sustain these global hierarchies. The most significant gender divides are not merely between men and women but between women in the Global North and Global South. Women in the South are disproportionately subjected to an international division of labour that reproduces colonial patterns of exploitation—what some Marxist feminists describe as global apartheid. Digitalization has not erased these inequalities; rather, it has intensified them by masking dependency and exploitation under the guise of empowerment. Marxist feminist analysis reveals that these disparities are embedded in structural economic and colonial legacies, wherein digital platforms often reproduce asymmetries rather than alleviate them. Addressing these inequalities requires structural interventions, including enforceable labour protections, redistributive economic policies, intersectional platform design, and transnational solidarity networks that center the agency of women from the Global South. By situating gender within global capitalism and colonial history, this study demonstrates that dismantling systemic exploitation in the digital economy requires both critical analysis and collective action. Recognizing and addressing these structural inequalities is crucial for achieving a genuinely inclusive digital future.

1. Introduction

What does it mean to speak of women's "empowerment" in the digital economy when opportunities and resources are distributed so unevenly across the world? While narratives of technological progress often celebrate women's participation, they rarely ask which women truly benefit and which remain confined to precarious, undervalued labour. This paper argues that the digital economy replicates and deepens global economic inequalities, creating a vast divide between women rooted in colonial and capitalist power structures. Women in economically marginalized regions are disproportionately absorbed into low-wage, insecure

forms of digital labour, while women in economically privileged regions gain access to greater opportunities, security, and agency. By situating gender within these global systems of exploitation, this study demonstrates that digitalization does not automatically empower women; instead, it often reinforces historical hierarchies and dependencies. Using a Marxist feminist lens, this study examines how structural economic inequalities continue to shape women's roles in the digital economy and highlights pathways toward more equitable labour and technological practices. To situate this argument within existing scholarship, it is important to examine how the literature has addressed gender, labour, and digitalization, highlighting both the insights and gaps that a Marxist feminist perspective can address.

2. Conflicting Views in Literature

2.1. Mainstream/Neoliberal Approaches

Mainstream neoclassical (neoliberal) literature, often reflected in standard economic textbooks, posits that ICTs and digital technologies empower women by improving access to education, work opportunities, and social welfare. Wajcman, Young, and Fitzmaurice (2020), in *The Digital Revolution: Implications for Gender Equality and Women's Rights 25 Years after Beijing*, explore how the digital revolution shapes women's roles across these domains. They note women's chronic underrepresentation in STEM and AI fields, with women comprising only 10–15% of the AI workforce, reflecting persistent gendered occupational segregation. This study identifies the risks and challenges of digital labour and proposes policy recommendations, including gender-sensitive analyses, ethical frameworks for AI, governance and monitoring systems, and education and training programs tailored for women.

Similarly, OECD reports on Gender Equality and Digital Transformation underscore the persistent ICT skills gap between men and women, highlighting that progress is slow, with only a 1% annual increase in female ICT specialists globally. These reports emphasize that the right mix of skills, digital literacy, and training is necessary for meaningful participation in the digital economy.

UNCTAD initiatives, such as *E-Trade for Women* and the ITU-ETF *EQUAL project*'s *Talking Tech* series targeting LDCs, focus on expanding women's access to technology, fostering digital literacy, and supporting entrepreneurship. The Digital Frontier Institute (2024) further argues that the digital economy, with its low physical barriers and flexible modes of work, offers women opportunities to circumvent traditional gender norms. It advocates for promoting digital education, technology access, and greater female participation in decision-making roles.

While these approaches provide practical strategies for improving women's participation in digital domains, they often assume that empowerment is primarily a function of individual access and skills. They rarely interrogate **why convergence between women in economically privileged and marginalized regions remains limited**, leaving unexamined the structural and historical factors shaping these disparities.

2.2 Critical Liberal/Intersectional Feminism

Critical feminist and intersectional perspectives push beyond skill- and access-focused frameworks by analyzing how digitalization interacts with multiple forms of inequality. Kwan

(2023), for instance, examined the digital economy through an intersectional lens, asking whom it benefits and whom it excludes. She emphasizes how overlapping social identities—race, class, ethnicity, educational background, and gender—affect digital inclusion and labour outcomes. Her study demonstrates that the digital economy often reproduces existing hierarchies, with platforms headquartered in economically privileged regions extracting cheap labour from marginalized regions—a phenomenon she terms "digital colonialism."

Yu and Lili Cui (2019) explore rural China's "Taobao villages," illustrating the limits of digital entrepreneurship as a pathway to empowerment. While women gain flexible job opportunities, they remain largely invisible in decision-making processes and are excluded from interactions with banks, suppliers and government authorities. Flexibility in labour adds to their **triple burden**—formal, informal, and immaterial work—revealing how digital participation can exacerbate existing inequalities rather than alleviate them.

Together, these perspectives emphasize that empowerment narratives in the digital economy must account for intersecting social and economic hierarchies. They demonstrate that digital technologies do not automatically democratize opportunity; instead, they reinforce structural inequities, particularly for women in marginalized contexts.

2.3 Feminist Political Economy/Postcolonial Critique

Feminist political economy and postcolonial critiques foreground the structural and historical forces shaping women's economic roles. Sarabia and Morell (2021) categorized gender approaches in the digital economy into three strands: feminist theory and ICT, feminist political economy, and mainstream economic analysis. They observed that most studies remain **androcentric and non-critical**, focusing on male-female differences rather than inequalities **among women**. While these analyses link gendered labour to capital accumulation under capitalism and patriarchy, they often overlook **primitive accumulation**, including expropriation, land grabbing, and structural adjustment programs, which exacerbate global inequalities.

Bhandari (2010) and Bhandari and Shrestha (2010) critique postmodern and Western-centric feminist frameworks, demonstrating that Euro-American feminism frequently universalizes its values, marginalizing women in developing regions. These studies argue that externally imposed feminist ideals often fail to reflect local social, economic, and cultural realities, thereby reproducing dependencies and inequities. Similarly, Khosravi Shakib (2010) contended that the postmodern fragmentation of identities should be understood as an effect of historical oppression rather than a marker of social progress.

These analyses underscore that **structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and global economic hierarchies** continue to shape women's labour, access to resources, and participation in the digital economy. They reveal that while digital technologies can offer new forms of work and flexibility, their benefits are unevenly distributed, often reinforcing rather than challenging the historical patterns of exploitation.

Across these works, two critical gaps stand out: a limited focus on the structural and economic factors shaping disparities among women globally and insufficient attention to the historical and colonial legacies underpinning these inequalities. Mainstream approaches emphasize skills, access, and individual empowerment, whereas critical perspectives highlight

systemic exploitation but rarely connect it fully to global capitalism, primitive accumulation, or neo-colonial economic structures.

Building on these critiques, this paper synthesizes and updates the literature by applying a Marxist feminist lens, foregrounding the international division of labour and surplus value extraction in the digital age. This approach situates women's digital labour within global hierarchies, linking gender inequality to structural economic forces and historical patterns of exploitation, and moves beyond superficial measures of empowerment toward a materially grounded understanding of the digital economy.

3. A Lost Cause?

3.1 Historical Material Base

Despite multiple initiatives by various stakeholders, a persistent divide remains between women in economically advanced nations and those in developing or underdeveloped countries regarding skills, access, affordability, and use of technology. Progress, where it occurs, is slow and uneven. This suggests that, beyond social or cultural factors, **economic structures** play a central role in shaping women's status in the digital economy. Women in developing regions are disproportionately marginalized, a condition rooted in **colonial history and the emergence of capitalism**, which historically structured global labour and value extraction along gendered and racial lines.

Women are classified not only by gender but also by race, class, and economic position. Western notions of the "independent woman" are often imposed on women in the Global South, overlooking regional differences and local realities. Even research conducted in developing nations rarely provides sufficient data to inform the literature that could genuinely represent women in these contexts.

3.2 The Modern Face

Women in developing nations are far from being homogeneous. Some enjoy privileges comparable to women in advanced economies; however, scholarship often homogenizes them as backward, less educated, or less skilled. These stereotypes reinforce a hierarchy among women, privileging those in wealthier nations while obscuring the structural constraints that limit opportunities for women in developing countries.

From a Marxian perspective, this is fundamentally an **economics of power**: women from low-class colonized regions have historically been treated as a labouring class from whom **maximum surplus value** is extracted. In contrast, privileged women in colonial powers gained economic and social benefits. This pattern of segregation, which originated during industrialization, persists today. Gendered inequalities are not merely social constructs or psychological biases but **products of historical and ongoing economic disparities** between former colonies and colonial powers.

3.3 The Digital Facade

Colonial-era divisions assigned women in colonized nations to low-skilled, poorly paid work, such as caregiving and agricultural labour. Even with technological advancements, these patterns persist: women in the Global South remain the largest pool of **exploitable labour** in

global value chains. Countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and several African nations have become targets for multinational corporations seeking cheap and flexible labour.

Digitalization has introduced new forms of precarious labour in the gig economy. Women in low-wage digital markets often face minimal job security, limited benefits, and few opportunities for advancement, yet their Western counterparts perceive them as "backward" or unambitious. The promise of global convergence through digital platforms has largely failed; instead, women in developing countries remain concentrated in low-value, high-risk segments of the global production. This unequal distribution exemplifies how digitalization can **reinforce historical patterns of exploitation** rather than offer genuine empowerment.

3.4 Western Feminism as Ideological Hegemony

Western feminism often emerges as another form of dominance over women in the Global South, framing barriers primarily in terms of the challenges faced by white women in wealthy nations. This approach risks **masking the structural legacies of colonialism**, offering remedies for problems created by historical exploitation rather than addressing the root causes.

A more neutral and globally informed perspective is required—one that recognizes the specific conditions of women in developing regions, treats them as active agents rather than passive recipients of Western aid or ideology, and situates digital labour within the **broader global hierarchies of power and capital**.

Capitalist and colonial legacies have shaped not only the economies of developing nations but also the global perceptions of gender. While friction between men and women has historically existed, the **systematic, global-scale denial of skills, financial autonomy, and opportunities** for women in developing nations distinguishes this era. In today's advanced digital economy, these inequalities cannot be ignored if meaningful empowerment and inclusion are to be achieved.

4. Towards a Decolonial Marxist Feminist Framework

There is a pressing need to view gender through a global lens that centers the experiences of women in the Global South while considering their colonial history, geographical diversity, and cultural significance. These factors have shaped persistent inequalities in economic power, creating a stark divide between women who can readily access global opportunities and those who remain excluded from them. When opportunities arise, women in economically privileged regions can capitalize on them, while others—often unaware of these possibilities—are left behind. This dynamic reinforces existing inequalities: the advantage continues to gain, while the marginalized fall further behind.

Social disparities cannot be understood in isolation; they are exacerbated and maintained by economic structures that are historically rooted in colonialism and capitalism. At the core lies the familiar divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots." While the complete elimination of capitalism may be unrealistic today, acknowledging and addressing the structural economic drivers of inequality is essential for fostering a more equitable society.

Policy interventions, government initiatives, strong institutions, and collective partnerships can yield progress in reducing gender gaps but are insufficient on their own. The

deep structural contradictions between women in privileged and marginalized regions must be addressed, as the majority of women in the Global South remain excluded from meaningful participation in the digital economy. To leverage the potential of digitalization, understanding the lived realities of women in these contexts is crucial. Current definitions of an "independent woman," grounded in Western ideals, often fail to resonate globally and risk promoting individualism at the expense of collective well-being. In many contexts, independence is conflated with selfishness or the erosion of family and community relationships.

The path forward requires redefining gender analyses to account for global structural inequalities. Women must not be viewed as abstract beneficiaries of empowerment programs but as central subjects in the study of digital labour. This entails examining the digital economy through the lens of class, global surplus extraction, and corporate power rather than focusing solely on access, skills, or entrepreneurship. Policies should address capital mobility, corporate taxation, and protection for digital labour, directing resources to infrastructure and economic empowerment in marginalized regions rather than narrowly emphasizing digital literacy. In this framework, independence should be reconceptualized as a collective and relational concept that reflects both personal agency and social cohesion.

While expanding women's participation in ICT jobs, entrepreneurship, and skilled labour is important, such gains cannot be sustained without transforming the structural conditions that continue to render women second- or third-class citizens globally. A truly inclusive digital economy demands that the experiences, needs, and agency of women in the Global South become the core of the analysis and policy design, ensuring that digital progress does not merely reproduce historical patterns of exploitation.

5. Conclusion

Conventional economics is ill-equipped to address the structural causes of gender inequality. The central question remains: for which women are we fighting, and is feminist theory truly inclusive of all women? Dominant frameworks, shaped by Western notions of independence and access, obscure the deeper divide between women in wealthier and marginalized regions—a divide rooted in colonial labour relations and sustained by global capitalism. Gender studies, whether in digital or traditional economies, cannot be fully understood without situating women within larger global economic structures.

Western feminist discourse often claims universality while disregarding the perspectives of women in the Global South, portraying them as backward, inferior or unliberated. This erasure silences Indigenous, marginalized, and poorly paid women in Asia, Latin America, and Africa while masking how their labour sustains the privileges of women in wealthier nations. Their contributions to families, communities, and global value chains remain undervalued and overlooked.

This paper advocates a renewed Marxist feminist framework that centers women in marginalized regions as the subjects of theory, rather than as peripheral figures. By foregrounding their lived experiences, feminist scholarship confronts the colonial and capitalist structures that perpetuate global inequalities. The solution requires reconceptualizing gender empowerment beyond individual access or skills to include structural interventions:

redistributing economic power, enforcing protections for digital and low-wage labour, regulating corporate and platform monopolies, taxing multinational corporations to fund infrastructure and social programs in marginalized regions, and redefining independence in collective, context-sensitive terms. Only through such systemic, globally aware policies can feminist theory advance a truly inclusive and emancipatory vision of gender justice.

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