feminist digital justice

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Diversifying Strategies for Feminist Digital Activism in the Global South

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Feminist Digital Justice is a collaborative research and advocacy initiative of IT for Change and DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). We aim to reinterpret the emerging techno-social paradigm from a Southern feminist standpoint. The project foregrounds debates at the intersection of enduring feminist concerns about gender justice and women's human rights on the one hand, and emerging issues at the digital frontier on the other.

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Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) is a network of feminist scholars,researchers and activists from the economic South working for economic and gender justice and sustainable and democratic development.
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Cover Image credits: Abortion-rights activists demonstrate in favor of decriminalizing abortion with a banner that reads in Spanish "Legal abortion 2020. It's urgent," outside Congress the day after Argentine President Alberto Fernández sent a bill to lawmakers to legalize abortion in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2020. (AP Photo/Victor R. Caivano)

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Introduction

In Argentina, the femicide of 14-year-old Chiara Páez in 2015 motivated a self-organized call to agitate against all types of violence against women under the slogan #NotOneLess.[1] What started as a Twitter campaign transformed, over time, into the Ni Una Menos movement. Online activism combined with the offline mobilization of thousands of women who took to the streets to express their outrage against gender-based violence.

At the beginning of 2018, a combination of inseparable processes of viralization in social networks and mediatization of televized discussions for the legalization of abortion also took place in Argentina (Laudano, 2018). This heralded a year of feverish activism in the digital space and on the streets, demanding the right to legal, safe, and free abortion, under the hashtag #LegalAbortionNow (#AbortoLegalYa in Spanish). Extending far beyond its birthplace of Argentina, the movement reinvigorated and revitalized the struggle that the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion has been carrying out since 2005.[2] This long-drawn out struggle led to the passage of legislation to enable elective, legal, free, and safe abortions on December 30, 2020. Reiterating the symbolism of past struggles, the movement used green scarves[3] mimicking the white scarves used by iconic mothers who assembled at the Plaza del Mayo to protest the disappearance of their children under the military and civic dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla and the Dirty War of 1976-83. The current Argentinian movement does not only revive this historic struggle but also advances feminist alliances and activism into the future. It, in turn, inspired hope and a sense of possibility in feminist movements fighting for decriminalization and legalization of abortion in other Latin American countries such as Ecuador where activism and networking took place under the hashtag #AbortoPorViolación, and in the Dominican Republic, under the hashtag #LasCausalesVan.

Feminist scholarship explains the interface between online and offline activism as a redoing of feminism, tracing the contestations within historical and contemporary feminist discourses and practices, linking the critical interconnections between the local and the global (Baer, 2016). Today, digital technology is arguably establishing new forms of political action across the globe. It is leveraging new modes of protest in virtual spaces and animating physical protests in offline spaces. It is also transporting protests across the globe in real and virtual time. This is of immense significance. When protests occur on the street, it is the hand-held digital device that transports them out of the local. This is what "…communication devices and technologies are doing when they 'report' on what is happening on the street" (Butler, 2015). In this instance the person wielding the device also becomes part of the protest and the offline and the online occupy public space.

Feminist activism in a networked society is also vigilant about online spaces being utilized by anti-rights, anti-gender,[4] and anti-feminist groups, along vested interests, including the state, as sites for proliferating misogyny,

[1] In Spanish: Ni Una Menos. More about this movement: López, María Pía (2020) Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience and Desire, Polity Press, Cambridge C; Elisabeth Jay Friedman & Constanza Tabbush (2016) https://nacla.org/news/2016/11/01/niunamenos-not-one-woman-less-not-one-more-death.
[2] More information: http://www.abortolegal.com.ar/about/ The hashtag #AbortoLegalYa started in Argentina and rapidly spread to other Latin-American countries: Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, etc.
[3] This choice goes back to the origins of the campaign for the right to legal, safe and free abortion in 2003. See: http://www.abortolegal.com.ar or http://www.abortolegal.com.ar/?fbclid=IwAR3jMTcqK0-ytSEAzABK9S5El2Xe35e2zJ8AGPcdXJ82iZCsWolu8dNoe8w.
[4] The anti-gender movement refers to the international movement that against what it refers as the "gender ideology" or "genderism".

homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, gender stereotypes, gender-based violence, and attacks on women and human rights defenders. Feminists have started challenging the corporatization and monopolization of the internet and digital platforms, and defending human rights against the invasion of privacy and the deployment of mass surveillance by corporations and states along with the increasing collusion between Silicon Valley companies and states. These interventions have led to the articulation and claiming of a right to communication, which is becoming a significant feature and a site of struggle for feminist activism and organizing in the networked age (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2017).

Digital Activism: A New Generation of Tools, Tactics, and Strategies

In 1995**,** 30,000 women gathered in Huairou and Beijing as part of the Women's NGO Forum to contribute to the production of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. These women connected, shared information, raised awareness, mobilized, networked, and arrived in Beijing using only snail mail, telegrams, telexes, and telephones.

This was also the year when China was connected to the world wide web. In Huairou, which served as the venue for the forum, desktop computers donated by IBM were displayed in a corner. It is here that many attendees learned how to surf the internet and open an email account for the first time. Others, mainly from developing countries, stayed away as a gesture of protest against cultural imperialism and its domination of information technology. Interestingly, the Beijing Platform for Action was blindsided. It made no mention of terms like 'internet' or 'digital' or any reference to this new phenomenon that would transform people's lives and feminist activism at an unprecedented pace in the decades to come. In 2020, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, feminist activists across the world connected via digital platforms to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration.

Historically, consciousness raising has been an important strategy of feminist activism and mobilizing. Digital activism has helped expand the space for consciousness-raising, networking, and mobilizing through a new generation of tools, tactics, and strategies to dismantle entrenched discrimination and enable the realization of a spectrum of rights (Clark, 2015). These tools include blogs, vlogs, Tumblr, YouTube, citizen journalism sites, and social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the increasingly popular TikTok. Activism via mobile phones has grown as a range of applications, like WhatsApp, are made accessible to an increasing number of people, and are being used for several purposes. These diverse forms of digital engagement allow specific movements situated within particular political, social, and cultural contexts to pick the platform that is best suited to them and can be leveraged for optimum effect, including the circumvention of opposition or censorship.

Digital activism combining emotive messaging with music, dance, folk, and other cultural references can mobilize more people towards specific causes and make protests go viral. For instance, in 2019, Chilean feminists put up a two-minute street performance, titled The Rapist Is You,[5] incorporating music, dance, and dissent to protest against rape, impunity, and state repression. On YouTube,[6] this performance piece became a popular reference point for activists across the world, from India to Tunis, Mexico, and the USA.

[5]The performance by Colectivo LasTesis: https://www.instagram.com/lastesis/?hl=es-la
[6]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8zv03IBCcA

A Snapshot of Evolving Feminist Digital Activism: The Case of China[7]

China provides a fascinating case study for the evolution of feminist digital activism as the internet linked hitherto isolated Chinese women, their organizations, and movements with the global feminist movement. When young Chinese feminists dressed in blood-stained wedding gowns took to the streets on Valentine's Day in 2012 (Figure 1) to raise awareness on intimate partner and domestic violence, they were inspired by a similar campaign catalyzed by US feminist writer Eve Ensler's 'The Vagina Monologues' as well as street action by Turkish feminists on the same theme.

Similarly, the logo of the #MeToo movement in China – the 'Rice Bunny' (Figure 2) – suggests the courage, innovation, and creativity of Chinese feminist organizing. Their action does not merely echo the global #MeToo movement – decentralized and controversial by itself – but also makes a unique and context-specific contribution in a very challenging political environment.

Figure 1. Blood-stained Wedding Gowns: Young Chinese Feminists took to the streets for the first time on Valentine's Day 2012.

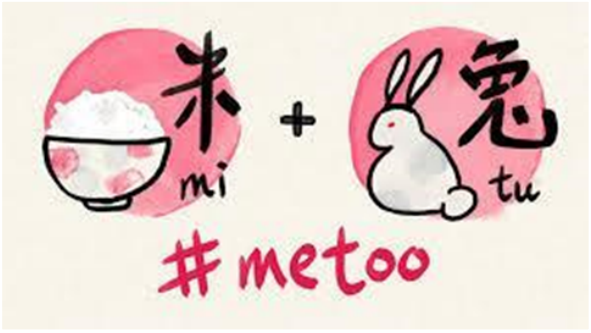

Figure 2. Logo of the Chinese #MeToo movement: 'Rice bunny' (米兔), pronounced 'mi tu' in Chinese, is a nickname given to the #MeToo campaign by Chinese social media users.

These connections and shared experiences make the Chinese women's movement an integral part of transnational feminist engagements as both participants and contributors. These include how issues are prioritized, what strategies and tactics are used, the hard negotiations and occasional compromises that need to be made with state authorities, and how the public responds to the promotion of women's rights and gender equality in a patriarchal and authoritarian society.

[7]This part is based on Cai Yiping's article *Women's Rights and Organizing in China in the Conjuncture of COVID-19 and Beijing+25*. DAWN discussion paper#34. March 2021. DAWN. Suva, Fiji. (https://dawnnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DAWN-Discussion-Paper-34_Women-s-Rights-and-Organising-in-China-in-the-Conjuncture-of-COVID-19-and-Beijing-25.pdf).

It is in this context that the internet and social media platforms provide an alternative space for feminist activism in China. Weibo, WeChat, and public accounts like 'Women's Voice' (which was blocked in March 2018), 'Just for Her' (which focuses on gender-based violence), and 'engenderchina' are influential feminist knowledge creation and information sharing platforms, where hundreds of thousands of subscribers congregate. These platforms give followers the space to associate with the feminist community, nationally and globally. They enable the subversive use of the internet to reclaim Chinese feminist activism from the margins and center it. Online activism has been a crucial medium of dissent and mobilization, especially since the detention of five young Chinese feminists in 2015, which put an end to street action. It also enables resistance in the face of a tightening of media censorship of social movements, including those advocating for women's and labor rights.

Yet, as with all other public domains, the online space is contested and controversial, defined and driven by patriarchal structures, political power dynamics, and corporate interests. It is also replete with tensions between regulators, operators/managements, and diverse users. Some activists in China face more censorship and obstructions (imposed by the state and media platforms) online than offline. This was the experience of women who used online platforms to discuss intimate partner violence during the Covid-19 lockdown. While online posts about domestic violence could not be published, posters disseminated in the community were retained on billboards for several months.

The Inherent Challenges of the Online Space: A Feminist Critique

While the online space remains politically significant, and it must be claimed, owned, and navigated carefully and strategically, it can never be taken for granted. As digital activism becomes more effective, it can elicit reactions from various power structures ranging from state-imposed surveillance and censorship to hate speech and violence against women that reproduce masculinist and patriarchal ideologies prevalent offline. Women and marginalized groups in particular can be subject to harsh criticism and unwanted scrutiny. Activists who are not digitally savvy can be targeted by bots and trolls, subjected to doxxing, privacy breaches, and violence (Mantilla, 2013). Often, these unrelenting attacks can drive women away from the online space and activism entirely (Clark, 2015). There is already a growing backlash in the digital space from conservative, anti-gender, and anti-rights groups.8 During the People's Summits in 2017 and 2018, organized to challenge the WTO Ministerial Conference and the G20 Forum in Argentina, the Mauricio Macri government deployed an illegal spying operation that surveilled public spaces and social media activities of hundreds of activists, journalists, and human rights defenders.

Digital media sites, particularly social media, are also a vehicle for disseminating violent content, including gender-based violence that is the product of socio-political or religious conflict. These platforms have historically provided a space for hate speech intended to incite both personal and mob violence, targeted at a young demographic including women. In Sri Lanka, Twitter and Facebook were weaponized against Muslims, including Muslim women in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings (Hattotuwa, 2018).

The digital space is also inherently unequal, privileging those with socio-economic capital and excluding those who are unable to access it for want of material resources. Disparate "access to information, knowledge and

[8]More information and analyses can be found at "Resources on Anti-Gender Ideology" compiled by Global Philanthropy Project. (https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2018/11/29/resistingagi/#1574262046103-f70c01c6-b764)

freedom of expression" are also determinants of digital inequality (Radovanovic quoted in Clark, 2015).

Control over digital platforms allows corporations to censor and use them to their benefit (Butler, 2018). In recent years, and mainly in the context of the pandemic, feminist activist networks formed in Latin America and the Caribbean have helped prevent violence and censorship on digital platforms. For example, the work done by the Latin American network 'Ciberseguras',[9] and the surveys conducted and promoted by the Mexican feminist organization 'Luchadoras'[10] on the condition of feminist activists and journalists in the face of digital violence and harassment.

Besides, the development and application of science and technology, algorithm, Big Data, and artificial intelligence, have systematically excluded women and feminist activists from online spaces, although they have an unprecedented impact on women's lives and feminist movement building. This lacuna has to be addressed urgently alongside developing a rights-based internet governance regime by building a public debate around it (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2017).

Feminist Activism in Argentina

While Chinese feminist activism utilized the digital space as the alternative for social mobilization and awareness-raising, the Argentinean feminist movement combined street and digital action, with powerful consequences.

A few days after the massive women's marches and strikes of March 8, 2020, the Argentine government decreed the Social, Preventive and Obligatory Isolation (ASPO as per its Spanish acronym), under the pretext of the health emergency of the pandemic. The decree, effective from March to November 2020, imposed a host of restrictions on public movements and created new forms and conditions of work in virtual and remote employment. The situation of workers varied, depending on whether they were employed formally or informally, in the public or private sector. Precarious work conditions worsened in the informal sector, especially for women. In response, feminist activists used the digital space to address the violation of civil and labor rights. During the pandemic-induced lockdowns, feminist activism highlighted the increased masculinist violence, femicides, and trans-femicides. In many cases, feminist art and communication were effectively combined to intervene through digital spaces.

An example of this form of activism was Argentinian activists assembling in digital spaces. Faced with the new reality of the pandemic, feminists convened a collective and horizontal online space called the 'Assembly of Workers in Times of Pandemic' (henceforth referred to as the Assembly). It was promoted by two organizations with a federal presence in the country: the Norita Cortiñas School of Popular Feminism (linked to popular feminist and trade union organizations) and the Argentine Association for Research in Women's History and Gender Studies (AAIHMEG as per its Spanish acronym), a network forged in public universities. For nine months, the Assembly brought together women workers from different provinces, cities, and working conditions. Among them were essential women workers, teachers, and workers from different trade unions, food producers, migrants, peasants, cooperative workers, and state sector workers. The Assembly, which included lesbian women, non-binary and

[9]See: https://ciberseguras.org/
[10]See: https://luchadoras.mx/?s=violencia+digital.

trans people, met every week through virtual platforms to ensure close contact and collaboration despite the virtual nature of the meetings.

A Snapshot of Evolving Feminist Digital Activism

The Assembly examined the situation of women frontline workers responding to the pandemic, who were trying to ensure that communities could sustain themselves and survive this unprecedented disruption to their economies and lives. It visibalized the importance of frontline workers' labor through the hashtag #SomosEsenciales (#WeAreEssential). The Assembly was also a space to articulate a feminist understanding of the pandemic and discuss what governments called the 'new normal'. Through collective reflection and mapping, it revealed the different forms of social control and violence being perpetrated during the pandemic, particularly the forms of population control deployed by the police in popular neighborhoods in Argentina. Serious cases that gained media coverage included young women and transgender people being detained by the police for "failing to comply with quarantine", and the case of 22-year-old Facundo Astudillo Castro, who went missing and was found dead in 2020, after being detained by the police.[11]

Given the physical isolation mandate, the Assembly was organized through virtual working groups and identified three broad areas of concern:

- The state of remote work;
- The centrality of 'essential work' and women workers to the sustainability of life; and
- Feminist responses to violence, racism, and exclusion during pandemic-induced isolation and confinement.

Feminist activists debated the harsh realities of telework, which was imposed as a crisis response without considering necessary safeguards or standards. During the debate on the Telework Law in the Argentinean Parliament, the Assembly organized an online campaign, TeleOrganised in Covid-Capitalism to amplify the diverse voices of women workers and LBT+ people. As part of this online campaign, feminists denounced the potential impact of telework on workers' rights. Using leaflets and podcasts, they pushed for more inclusive voices and feminist perspectives in a debate that was selectively open to a few (usually male) trade unionists and employers, and visibalized the work of essential women workers

The Assembly recognized that attempts by companies to popularize working from home by invoking surveys that offered sugar-coated data on the benefits of 'working in slippers' and 'saving on transport' were, in fact, a tactic to depoliticize the concept of work. Working from home meant an overlap of tasks, spaces, and care, the loss of privacy, and a jeopardizing of the right to unionize. In short, it was a new attempt to confine workers, this time, in their homes. Spokeswomen from the Assembly appeared on radio and in digital media, arguing for the regulation of telework from a feminist perspective. These interventions had a horizontal character and, by rotating the spokeswomen, highlighted the heterogeneity of the Assembly.

[11]The reports can be accessed at Observatorio Social de Juventudes from ISEPCI https://isepci.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/INFORME-FINAL-REGISTRO-VIOLENCIA-EN-PANDEMIA-1.pdf. The case of Facundo Astudillo is available in CELS: https://www.cels.org.ar/web/2020/07/donde-esta-facundo-castro/.

Feminists also challenged the fact that the law to regulate telework would come into effect only 90 days after the imposition of the ASPO, although telework was immediately impacting workers' bodies and lives. Another focal point of the campaign was the care crisis that had intensified in the wake of the pandemic. Replicated by other feminist organizations in the country, the campaign opened up debates in trade unions across different sectors (led by teachers and workers in public administration), and built collective knowledge about the normative and regulatory implications of telework.

Activists also raised concerns about what has been called a second pandemic: that of domestic violence. Gendered inequalities and gender-based violence intensified during the pandemic, evidenced by the increase in femicides, trans-femicides, racism, evictions, xenophobia, and lack of access to health and sexual and reproductive rights. The Assembly made these arguments through flyers and videos as part of a parallel campaign called the Violence in Pandemic: To What Normality Do You Want to Return?

Challenges in the Digital Space

The 32 Assemblies held during the pandemic mapped the problems and tensions linked to the world of work and responded to them. The digital space allowed for this collective organization and visibalized voices that were absent in the conventional and mainstream media.

But the digital space also threw up challenges as the Assembly suffered virtual attacks and hacks by anti-feminist and ultra-conservative groups. Participants in the virtual discussion rooms were heckled and condemned as 'abortionists'. Organizers responded by changing their security and care practices to prevent further attacks. This made the space more secure, but foreclosed the possibility of massive participation. Simultaneously, the Assembly launched a campaign denouncing the monopolistic power exerted by, and the increased profits of digital platforms such as Zoom, Google, and Facebook (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Argentine feminist digital activism in action: 'Tele-organized in Covid-capitalism' campaign as a critique of corporate power: Flyer and podcast development.

On the Streets Again: December 2020

The Assembly used offline and online space in a mixed and synchronous way. They projected posters and images from the balconies of buildings and neighborhoods that were simultaneously seen in different cities across the country. The combination of technological and audiovisual resources amplified the Assembly's messages and demands despite home confinement (Figure 4). Under the slogan, "Our rights are not quarantined!", the assembly denounced the thwarting of certain rights during the pandemic.

As part of their campaigns, they supported the fight for the legalization of abortion. In a mixed medium campaign that used the hashtag #LegalAbortionNow, the Assembly displayed images demanding "legal, safe and free abortion" on buildings, neighborhoods, and street walls. They also used Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to deliver these messages to a wider audience.

Towards the end of mandatory isolation in Argentina, the Assembly's virtual actions began to mix with activism in the streets, mobilizing for the Law on Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy[12] (Ley IVE, according to its Spanish acronym).

Figure 4. 'Proyectazo': Projecting slogans and leaflets on buildings in Buenos Aires for legal, safe, and free abortion.

During these campaigns, digital spaces became spaces of mobilization, awareness-building, and self-care. They allowed lesbian women, non-binary, and trans people from all over the country to connect, analyze issues, and build tools to confront labor re-precarization, the burden of unpaid care work, and the increase of economic violence and indebtedness in the pandemic. At the assessment meeting in December 2020, one of the Assembly members, Nayla Vacarezza, said, "If Covid-19 is a crisis of touch, because people cannot touch and hug each other, this Assembly has been an antidote to that crisis of touch." At the same time, Assembly participants reflected on care policies in the online space and in street mobilization, and the new forms of care that could be created for activism in the future.

Argentine feminists responding to the Covid-19 crisis, issues of gender justice, and new development paradigms mediated by digital capitalism, needed to break down the ambivalent divisions between the online and offline spaces, since mobilizations before and after the Covid-mandated closures occupied both spaces with effective continuity.

Conclusion: Claiming, Critiquing and Owning the Digital Space

As the experiences of Argentina and China reveal, feminist activism is innovatively utilizing new digital tools for mobilization and organizing. At the same time, these movements are incrementally developing comprehensive critiques of digital platforms and data regimes that are characterized by hegemony, monopoly, and surveillance. These regimes enforce the power of states and corporations and exacerbate inequality, injustice, discrimination, and violence.

The online space is owned and structured by offline power relations (Carstensen, 2014). Therefore, feminist activists' use of the digital space to demand a range of rights must be understood in the context of the right to communicate and the contestation "between powerful status quoist forces and those who seek transformative, global change for justice and equality" (Gurumurthy, 2017).

[12]This is relevant because it raises access to abortion as a right and is framed as a public health issue.

This medium of struggle must now be owned by feminists as they navigate, challenge, and subvert the power and structures that make up the digital realm. Online platforms are spaces in which feminists now make both easy and uneasy, predictable and unpredictable alliances in their struggles for social, political, economic, and gender justice. This collective resistance is in search of "new political paradigms, languages, and symbols that combat the neoliberal reduction of the political to the personal" (Baer, 2016). Such a paradigm may provide feminists a framework to explore women's lived experiences in virtual or digital spaces and propel feminist thinking to critique, imagine, and re-create a radically open internet and leverage a more emancipatory form of feminism.

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