

# The Impact of Digitalization on Rural Women's Participation in Feminist Movement Building and Organizing in Uganda; a Case Study of Zombo District.

HOPE ATIM<sup>1</sup> & IMMACULATE MUKASA<sup>2</sup>



Sustaining Women's leadership



SCAN ME



TO DOWNLOAD  
THIS PAPER



**Sustaining Women's leadership**

# CONTENTS

01		Abstract	Page : 02
02		List of Acronymns	Page : 03
03		Background	Page : 03
04		Objectives & Methodology	Page : 03
05		Literature Review	Page : 04
06		Results	Page : 06
07		Discussions	Page : 07
08		Recommendations	Page : 08
09		Conclusion	Page : 9
10		References	Page : 9

66

This paper therefore highlights the need for empowerment of rural women with digital knowledge and skills to effectively participate in feminist movement building and the establishment of the right policy enablers to address the digital gender gaps.

# Abstract

This paper examines the impact of digitalization on rural women's participation in feminist movement building and organizing in Uganda. It highlights the potential opportunities it provides for women to lead, participate in, and benefit from such movements. Digital technologies, such as telephone, emails, and social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok, have become essential tools for feminist movement organizing and building. However, they also have an excluding effect on rural women who are not in a position to use them. During our field engagements, we conducted some one on one interviews, Focused Group Discussions, Key informant interviews and direct observations to understand the impact of digitalization on rural women's participation in Paidah sub county, Zombo district

Our findings show that 1) Using technology demands high software capabilities which is lacking in most rural women. 2) The patriarchal societal structure does not allow women to be technologically savvy. 3) Lack of relevant knowledge on how to use technology and lastly 4) Inadequate finance to buy technology gadgets affects rural women's participation in feminist movement building. It's evident that digital technologies have enabled the emergence of online communities where women come together to learn, get empowered, access role models, and information, and strengthen sisterhood and solidarity on issues affecting women in Uganda. However, whereas digitalization is promoting feminist movement building, it is also reinforcing gender stereotypes and gender-based Violence, deepening the social exclusion of rural women as was shared by some participants in this study. This paper therefore highlights the need for empowerment of rural women with digital knowledge and skills to effectively participate in feminist movement building and the establishment of the right policy enablers to address the digital gender gaps.

**Authors:** Ms. Hope Atim; Ms. Immaculate Mukasa; Mentoring and Empowerment Program for Young Women (MEMPROW) Uganda

**Paper Presented** at the Joint Conference of Feminist Africa and the International Feminist Journal of Politics in Maputo, Mozambique, July 25 to 28, 2024.



# List of Acronyms

<b>CEDAW-</b>	Convention on the Elimination of Domestic Violence Against Women
<b>FGD -</b>	Focus Group Discussions
<b>GSMA-</b>	Global System for Mobile Communications
<b>KII-</b>	Key informant Interviews
<b>MEMPROW -</b>	Mentoring and Empowerment Program for Young Women

## Background

Digitalization is a major tool for empowering women to enable their inclusion in labour markets, in entrepreneurial and financial activities. It strengthens their digital inclusion and participation in feminist movement building and organization among others, for example their access to digital technologies like computers, phones and platforms like twitter, facebook, tiktok, instagram goes a long way in amplifying their voices in society.

As the world becomes more digitalized, the internet has become a powerful tool for feminists and activists to organize, amplify voices, advocate for change, and foster global solidarity and sisterhood. Everywhere in Africa, Feminists have been leveraging the reach of technology such as social media to mobilize support, hold training, conduct campaigns to drive social change and speak against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and all forms of discrimination against women and girls. Whereas this has been a powerful tool for feminist organizing, movement building, and enabling women's voices to be heard amidst the shrinking civic space, especially in Uganda, It has also had an excluding effect on rural women who are not in a position to use the different digital platforms and equipment (Gargets). It's against this background that the Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW) conducted this study to understand the impact of digitalization on rural women's participation in feminist movement building and organizing in Paidha sub county Zombo district, Uganda.

This paper highlights our findings on rural women's participation on digital platforms, especially in regard to feminist organizing, connection, advocacy for women's rights, and mobilization for feminist engagement. The study also explores the challenges they face in participating in feminist online organizing and movement-building activities. It also establishes strategies on how to ensure inclusive digital participation of rural women in feminist movement building and organizing.

## Objectives & Methodology

### Objectives

- ✓ *To find out how rural women are utilizing digital platforms to connect, advocate, and mobilize as feminists.*
- ✓ *To find out the challenges faced by rural women in participating in feminist online organizing and movement-building activities.*
- ✓ *To establish strategies on how to ensure inclusive digital participation for rural women in feminist movement building and organizing.*

## Methodology

- ✓ **Focus Group Discussions (FGD)** with women and girls aged 18– 45 years were conducted to assess the level of access to digital technologies such as smartphones, and social media platforms such as Facebook, twitter, and Instagram among others. These were rural women, majority were uneducated, unemployed and some were single mothers as well. In this focused group discussions, participants were asked to share some of the challenge they in accessing and using digital platforms a total of 4 FGDs (each group consisted of 8–10 women). Out of this, one FGD session was with men.
- ✓ **Key informant Interviews (KII)** was also conducted for specific people such as women leaders, women advisors, local activists, cultural leaders and religious leaders. These were educated, majority were working class and were in position of leadership at the sub county and grass root or community level.
- ✓ **One on one interviews** with young women and girls were also conducted , The sampled people also suggested strategies on how to ensure inclusive digital participation for rural women in feminist movement building and organizing
- ✓ **Lastly, we also tracked our online engagements on our social media platforms (twitter spaces, zoom meetings , google meetings)**

## Literature Review

### Digitalization and Feminist Organizing

Globally the digital age has significantly influenced the realm of activism, offering feminists valuable platforms to enhance their voices, cultivate networks, and advocate for gender justice.

The “digital Age” also known as the information age, computer age or new media age is a period in the history of Humans that is characterised by the use computers.

Research suggests that digital technologies have empowered feminist movements to engage with broader audiences, mobilize rapidly, and foster safe spaces for dialogue and advocacy (Emejulu & McGregor, 2019). Social media, in particular, has played a pivotal role in the emergence of influential feminist movements such as #MeToo, #SayHerName, and #BringBackOurGirls (Coche, 2020). However, it is important to acknowledge that access to these platforms is not equitable; rural women often face substantial challenges attributed to economic, educational, and cultural factors (UN Women, 2021).

Ensuring digital inclusion across the whole population has been a European Union policy priority during the first decade of the twenty-first century, in accordance with the goal of providing all citizens with the skills they need to meet the challenges of the digitalization of the economy and society (European Commission, 2010, 2016). European digital policies have been focused on providing digital skills to e-excluded social groups, which are also the groups with the fewest social opportunities (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Women, and particularly low-skilled women, have been one of the targets of these digital inclusion policies (Arroyo, 2018b; Arroyo & Valenduc, 2016).



These policies assumed that digital inclusion would enable disadvantaged social groups to overcome other social inequalities and be better qualified to meet the demands of a digitalized labour market and society (European Commission, 2010, 2016).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, digital technologies have become crucial tools for feminist movements to challenge patriarchal structures, amplify grassroots activism, and advocate for policy reforms. Campaigns such as #EndFGM, #TotalShutdown, and #MyDressMyChoice have gained momentum, using social media to challenge gender-based violence and discriminatory norms (Ndung'u & Waema, 2019). However, despite the increasing digital penetration in the region, gendered digital divides persist. According to the GSMA (2022), women in Sub-Saharan Africa are 37% less likely to use mobile internet than men due to affordability issues, digital literacy gaps, and socio-cultural restrictions.

In Uganda, although the country has in the last few decades enacted several laws and policies to promote gender equality, such as the Vision 2040, the National Development Plan, the Equal Opportunities Commission Act (2007), and the National Youth Policy, none of them are specific with clear provisions on reducing the gender digital divide. Uganda has also ratified international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Domestic Violence Against Women (CEDAW), the Maputo Declaration on Gender Mainstreaming (2003), the African Youth Charter (2006), and the Sustainable Development Goals.

In rural areas like Zombo District, feminist digital organizing faces distinct challenges. Limited internet access, high costs of digital devices, and lower levels of digital literacy hinder women's participation in online activism. While mobile phone ownership has increased, the gender gap in access remains significant, with men having more control over digital resources (Uganda Communications Commission, 2021). Nonetheless, grassroots feminist organizations in Zombo have adopted innovative approaches, such as using community radio programs to foster discussions on gender justice. Local initiatives, including MEMPROW's digital advocacy training, aim to equip young women with digital skills to navigate online spaces safely and effectively.

### **Barriers to Digital Inclusion for Rural Women**

Studies highlight multiple factors contributing to rural women's digital exclusion. A report by the World Bank (2022) emphasizes that digital literacy, affordability, and infrastructural deficits disproportionately affect women in rural areas. Furthermore, patriarchal norms and gendered power relations limit women's ability to access and effectively utilize digital tools (GSMA, 2020). Rural women often rely on male family members for access to digital devices, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies and limiting their autonomy in online spaces (Hafkin & Huyer, 2020).

### **The Gender Digital Divide in Uganda**

Uganda's digital gender divide is well documented, with rural women having significantly lower access to digital resources compared to their urban counterparts (UCC, 2021). The cost of smartphones, unreliable internet connectivity, and societal perceptions about women's use of technology further exacerbate this divide. Studies indicate that initiatives aimed at bridging this gap must address not only infrastructural deficits but also socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's digital engagement (UNESCO, 2020).

### **Feminist Theories and Digital Exclusion**

Feminist theories argue that digital exclusion is a form of structural violence that reinforces existing gender inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991). The lack of digital access and literacy among rural women perpetuates their marginalization, preventing

them from fully participating in civic and feminist engagements (hooks, 2000). Digital literacy initiatives, gender-sensitive ICT policies, and affordable access to digital tools are crucial for ensuring inclusivity in feminist movements (Harding, 2004). Relating to the Techno feminism theoretical and practical framework that explores the intersections between technology, gender, and power and also rooted in feminist thought, it critically examines how technology shapes, reinforces, or disrupts gender inequalities and seeks to envision more equitable futures through technological design and use. A primary concern of techno feminism is the relationship between historical and societal norms, and technology design and implementation. Techno feminist scholars actively work to illuminate the often unnoticed inequities ingrained in systems and come up with solutions to combat them. They also research how technology can be used for positive ends, especially for marginalized groups.

Early insights into the implications of digital technologies for the transformation of gender relations argued that the internet offered a great deal of potential to transform gender relations and identities (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1998). In terms of time, as they suggest that the internet offers the possibility of adopting roles beyond gender stereotypes, digital inclusion could provide an opportunity to explore new time allocations that challenge the gender division of labour.

Despite these theoretical proposals, there is a lack of empirical studies that have determined the potential impact of digital inclusion in terms of gender equality in time use. Early empirical studies in the field analyzed the consequences of being excluded in terms of social inequality by comparing the “haves” and “have-nots,” but they assumed that opportunities for internet use are the same across the whole e-included population. This omission was noticed by the second wave of digital divide studies, which detected that access to technology alone does not lead directly to more social opportunities; they demonstrate that a person can be “info-excluded” despite having access to the internet. They went one step further by introducing the acquisition of e-skills and the different types of internet use in their analysis. These studies produced significant knowledge about the different types of use and showed how they are socially stratified (Valenduc, 2010; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

## Results

Our findings were as follows;

### ► There was generally low participation of rural women on digital platform

There were several challenges or forms of barriers to rural women's participation in online feminist organizing, and these ranged from: Structural, economic, social barriers & mindset.

- ✓ The biases about digital platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, zoom, google) to low education levels, unemployment and lack of finances to purchase digital targets.
- ✓ Limited knowledge and skills on how to engage online. ‘Using technology demands a high level of knowledge and skills which is lacking in most rural women’ according to one of the respondents. About 60 % rural women are not aware of the existence of digital platforms.
- ✓ **Patriarchal societal structure/ men's power over women** in the community does not allow women to embrace and learn technology. One of the respondents attested that regressive culture, stereotypes, and negative perceptions about women's role have been a great limitation as “ most men have smartphones but would not buy for their wives because of fear, that they would chat with other men”

- ✓ 6 out of 10 respondents from the KII interviews noted that the few rural women who own smartphones generally lack relevant knowledge to join digital platforms such as Twitter spaces, zoom meetings, and digital campaign was noted to affect rural women's participation in feminist movement building.
- ✓ **Inadequate finances to buy digital gadgets** "most rural women do not own digital gadgets like phones because they can't afford them" this was a common response from both the FDG and the KII
- ✓ **Poor internet connectivity in rural areas also affects rural women's participation in digital spaces** "even those who own smart phones and would want to join online meetings and trainings are normally frustrated by poor network"
- ✓ **Power outage and no electricity** in most rural areas of the Zombo district
- ✓ **The cost of data** to join online feminist engagements makes it hard for many rural women to participate.

## Discussions

From our findings, and basing on the techno feminism theory, digitalization has the potential to transform societies, but it also reinforces unequal power relations and contributes to gender-based violence (GBV), particularly for rural women who already face structural inequalities. Where men own phones and women have to share with their husbands. Below are discussions on some of the impact of digitalization on rural women's participation.

### Digital Exclusion and Unequal Power Relations

#### *Limited Access to Technology*

Women, especially in rural areas, have lower access to digital devices and internet connectivity due to economic disparities and cultural norms that prioritize men's access. The gender digital divide reinforces existing inequalities, limiting rural women's participation in education, economic opportunities, and decision-making power in society and spaces.

#### *Digital Illiteracy and Economic Disempowerment*

Lack of digital skills prevents women from fully engaging in digital economies, leadership, and advocacy. Male-dominated tech industries and online platforms maintain gender hierarchies, where women's voices are often marginalized and unheard especially in the rural areas.

### Digital Gender-Based Violence (DGBV)

#### *Online Harassment and Abuse*

Rural women engaging in digital spaces face cyberbullying, and threats, often discouraging their participation in leadership, activism. For example Gendered hate speech against women and women leaders silences their voices and reinforces male dominance in public discourse.

#### *Sexual Exploitation and Image-Based Violence*

Girls and young women in rural areas are more vulnerable to online exploitation, as they lack digital safety awareness.



### **Economic Control and Financial Abuse**

Digital financial tools (e.g., mobile banking) can empower women but also facilitate economic control by abusive partners who monitor or restrict their transactions. In rural areas, where women have less economic independence.

## **Implications for Women and Girls in Uganda**

The findings of this study reveal that the digital gender divide in Uganda has far-reaching consequences for rural women's participation in feminist movements. The lack of access to digital platforms limits their ability to engage in advocacy, access information, and mobilize for social change. This exclusion reinforces existing gender disparities, leaving rural women without representation in online feminist spaces where critical discussions on gender rights take place.

The study underscores the patriarchal structures that dictate digital access and usage among rural women. The control of digital devices by male family members not only restricts women's autonomy but also exacerbates gender-based violence (GBV). The findings also indicate that digital exclusion has left most rural women vulnerable to misinformation, economic disempowerment, and a lack of access to support networks. Therefore, equipping women with digital skills can serve as a protective mechanism against GBV, enabling them to report abuses and seek support.

## **Implications for the Feminist Movement in Uganda**

The exclusion of rural women from digital feminist organizing limits the diversity and inclusivity of feminist movements in Uganda. Without the voices of rural women, digital feminist activism risks being urban-centric, failing to address the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups. Feminist movements must therefore prioritize rural digital inclusion as a key agenda, ensuring that online activism translates into tangible benefits for all women, regardless of their geographic location.

## **Recommendations**

- ✓ There is need for government to promote digital literacy, especially among the rural women so as to increase women and girls' participation in feminist movement building.
- ✓ Government and CSOs should work together to empower women through Income Generating Activities (IGA) and increase employment opportunities for women, this will increase their incomes and their ability to afford the cost of internet data.
- ✓ There is need for Government to reduce / subsidize the cost of technology devices/targets, additionally data costs must be regulated and made affordable for average Ugandans to purchase.
- ✓ There is need for Ugandan Government policy to revise their policies ie double taxation on mobile money and data.



## Conclusion

Digitalization is a powerful tool for feminists organizing, movement building, amplifying voices, advocating for change and fostering global solidarity and sisterhood in the continuously shrinking civic space. It's therefore important that the digital gender gaps and challenges that rural women experience are addressed to ensure inclusive participation of all women and girls even for the most disadvantaged groups. The study highlighted some challenges and barriers to women's participation in the digital space and these includes among others The biases about digital platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, zoom, google) to low education levels, unemployment and lack of finances to purchase digital gadgets, limited knowledge and skills on how to engage online and Patriarchal societal structure/ men's power over women in the community does not allow women to embrace and learn technology.

The study emphasizes the importance of establishing legal frameworks and policies that promotes digital literacy among rural women and girls to promote gender equality and address the gender digital divide, it also calls on government to revise their policies ie double taxation on mobile money and data, reduce / subsidize the cost of technology devices/gadgets, additionally data costs must be regulated and made affordable for average Ugandans to purchase. These and other interventions will help to increase rural women's participation in feminist organizing and in amplifying voices of the marginalized and promote gender equality.

## References

- Arroyo, L. (2020). Implications of digital inclusion: Digitalization in terms of time use from a gender perspective. *Social Inclusion*, 8(2), 180-189. retrived from <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/69795>
- A matrix and analysis of GENDER EQUALITY laws and policies in Uganda. <https://www.dgf.ug/sites/default/files/resrc/A-Matrix-and-Analysis-of-the-Gender-Equality-Laws-and-Policies-in-Uganda.pdf>
- Härtel, J.C.R. and Härtel, C.E.J. (2020), "What the Digital Age Is and Means for Workers, Services, and Emotions Scholars and Practitioners", Härtel, C.E.J., Zerbe, W.J. and Ashkanasy, N.M. (Ed.) *Emotions and Service in the Digital Age (Research on Emotion in Organizations, Vol. 16)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 9-17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1746-97912020000016003>
- Leveraging Digitalization for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Africa , 2022
- National Housing and Population Census 2014 [https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03\\_20182014\\_National\\_Census\\_Main\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03_20182014_National_Census_Main_Report.pdf)
- <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Digital-Equity-Policy-Brief-W20-Japan.pdf> 23 UCC (2015) Access and Usage of ICT across Uganda
- <https://www.ucc.co.ug/files/downloads/20150130-UCC-access-usage-dissemination.pdf> 24 Web Foundation (2016)
- Women's Rights Online Scorecard Uganda 25 Freedom House (2018) Freedom on the Net/Uganda at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uganda>
- National Housing and Population Census 2014

[https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03\\_20182014\\_National\\_Census\\_Main\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03_20182014_National_Census_Main_Report.pdf) 27 Ibid 28 A matrix and analysis of GENDER EQUALITY laws and policies in Uganda.

<https://www.dgf.ug/sites/default/files/resrc/A-Matrix-and-Analysis-of-the-Gender-Equality-Laws-and-Policies-in-Uganda.pdf>

Härtel, J.C.R. and Härtel, C.E.J. (2020), "What the Digital Age Is and Means for Workers, Services, and Emotions Scholars and Practitioners", Härtel, C.E.J., Zerbe, W.J. and Ashkanasy, N.M. (Ed.) *Emotions and Service in the Digital Age (Research on Emotion in Organizations, Vol. 16)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 9-17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1746-979120200000016003>



## **Sustaining Women's leadership**

This is a publication by Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW)



Plot 1476 Muyenga Road,  
Kampala, Uganda



+256(0) 761 848 408



+256(0) 761 848 408

SCAN ME



TO **DOWNLOAD**  
THIS PAPER



**MEMPROWUganda**

[www.mempro.org](http://www.mempro.org)

