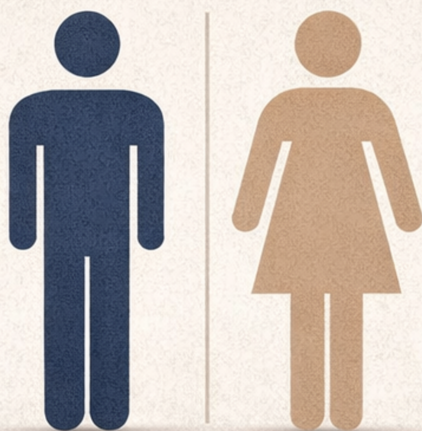
RETHINKING GENDER

IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

POWER, IDENTITY, AND RIGHTS



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Ibrahim Abdullahi

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PREFACE

Rethinking Gender in Contemporary Societies: Power, Identity, and Rights brings together a range of scholarly contributions that critically explore the changing dynamics of gender in today's globalized world. While significant progress has been made in advancing gender equality, persistent inequalities continue to shape social structures, identities, and access to rights across different contexts.

The chapters in this volume address key issues such as the role of the family in identity formation, the intersection of gender with culture and power relations, and the impact of globalization and digitalization on women's experiences. In addition, the book examines reproductive justice and health equity from feminist perspectives, highlighting the importance of rights-based approaches in addressing gender inequalities.

By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, this volume integrates insights from sociology, gender studies, and global health. It not only contributes to academic discussions but also provides a broader understanding of how gender is constructed, negotiated, and transformed within contemporary societies.

It is hoped that this book will serve as a valuable resource for researchers, students, and practitioners interested in gender, identity, and social justice, while encouraging further critical reflection on the relationship between power, rights, and social change.

Editorial Team
March 24, 2026
Türkiye

CHAPTER 1
THE FAMILY AS A SPACE OF SOCIALISATION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: THE FEMININE ROLE BETWEEN STABILITY AND CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Preamble: The Family as a Laboratory of the Self

In the complex architecture of contemporary society, the family occupies a unique and irreducible position. It is not only an economic unit, a legal arrangement or an affective community; it is, before all, the matrix of subjectivity. Primary socialisation the process through which the biological, undifferentiated being is transformed into a social actor capable of navigating the symbolic universe of culture takes place almost exclusively within the bosom of the family. The school, the peer group, the mass media and, more recently, the digital environment will subsequently contribute to the modelling of the individual, but the foundation the deep layer of identity, of primary attachments and of ontological trust is poured in the first years of life, in the continuous interaction with parental figures.

This chapter proposes a shift of focus from the macroscopic structure of the family (composition, typologies, life cycles) to the micro-analysis of the discursive and symbolic interactions that take place in the domestic space. We will demonstrate that the family is not only a shelter, an emotional refuge or a network of solidarity, but a linguistic and symbolic laboratory in which subjectivity is 'fabricated'.

Every conversation at dinner, every story told at bedtime, every reprimand or verbal encouragement contributes to the construction of a 'self' that will carry, throughout its entire life, the imprint of these first interactions. At the centre of this complex process of identity modelling lies a fundamental gender polarity, often overlooked in classical analyses of socialisation. The central thesis that we will develop and sustain throughout this chapter is the following: In the symbolic economy of the traditional and modern family, the woman especially in her maternal role functions as the main 'actor of stability', guarantor of cultural and affective continuity, while the man in his paternal role is socially constructed as the main 'factor of progress', agent of change and mediator with the external world.

This dichotomy, far from being a simple anthropological curiosity, has profound consequences on the way in which children internalise their own gender identities, on the distribution of cultural and linguistic capital in the family and on the capacity of the family institution to respond to contemporary challenges from migration and digitalisation to multiculturalism and the diversification of forms of cohabitation.

Chapter Objectives

The chapter pursues five main, interconnected objectives:

- The detailed analysis of the discursive and symbolic mechanisms through which the family functions as a primary space of socialisation and identity construction, integrating the contributions of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959), systemic theory (Watzlawick et al., 1967) and sociolinguistics (Bernstein, 1971/2003).
- The exploration of the differentiated role of parents in this process, with a focus on the gender polarity – the woman as actor of stability (keeper of tradition, of the mother tongue, of affectogenic routines) and the man as factor of progress (agent of change, mediator with the exterior, promoter of cultural and technological innovation).
- The deepening of the concept of habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in the familial context, demonstrating how differences in social class are transmitted and naturalised through apparently neutral discursive practices (invisible pedagogy, cultural consumption, bodily hexis).
- The investigation of contemporary challenges to the socialising function of the family: the impact of divorce and reconstituted families on children's identity; the competition with digital media and 'horizontal socialisation' through social networks; the emergence of transnational and multicultural families and the reconfiguration of linguistic and identity loyalties.

- The formulation of a theory of 'reflexive socialisation', in which the family no longer transmits a fixed and immutable set of values, but cognitive, linguistic and cultural instruments that enable the individual to navigate between multiple possible identities, in a world characterised by diversity and accelerated change.

Theoretical framework: An interdisciplinary architecture

To address the complexity of socialisation and identity construction processes in the family, we adopt an integrative theoretical framework, constructed at the intersection of four major intellectual traditions.

Symbolic interactionism and social dramaturgy: The starting point is constituted by the contributions of George Herbert Mead (1934) and the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism. Mead demonstrates that the self is not a pre-social entity, but a product of social interaction. The child becomes a person through the capacity to take the role of the other – to see oneself from the perspective of the interaction partner. The family offers the first and most significant opportunities for this exercise of decentring: the child learns to perceive their own actions through the eyes of the mother, the father, the siblings.

Erving Goffman (1959) extends this perspective through the dramaturgical metaphor. Social life is a stage, and individuals are actors who present their selves before audiences. The family is the first stage on which the child practises the 'presentation of self' – impression management, adherence to rules of politeness, the distinction between 'front stage' and 'backstage' behaviour. Here are learned the rituals of interaction – greeting, requesting, thanking, apologising – which will constitute the foundation of social competence throughout life.

Systemic theory and human communication: The Palo Alto School and, in particular, the works of Paul Watzlawick and his collaborators (1967) bring an essential contribution through the fundamental axiom: 'one cannot not communicate'. In the family, any behaviour – including silence, absence, avoidance – carries meaning and contributes to the construction of identity.

From this perspective, the family is not a collection of individuals, but a communication system characterised by:

- Totality: The system is more than the sum of its parts; the relationships between members are as important as the members themselves.
- Circularity: Causality in the family is circular, not linear; the behaviour of each member is simultaneously response and stimulus for the behaviour of others.
- Metacommunication: Besides explicit messages (content), the family constantly communicates about the nature of the relationship between members – who has authority, who is close, who is excluded.

Sociolinguistics and social reproduction: Basil Bernstein (1971/2003) offers the instruments to understand how social inequalities are reproduced through familial language. His distinction between restricted code and elaborated code is not merely a technical classification, but a theory of power and social control. Working-class families tend to use a restricted code, based on common presuppositions, on short sentences and on implicit authority; middle and upper-class families use an elaborated code, explicit, analytical, which prepares the child for the discursive demands of school and of elite professions. Pierre Bourdieu (1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) extends this analysis through the concept of habitus – a system of durable and transposable dispositions, incorporated in the body and in language, which guides action without necessarily being conscious. The family is the principal producer and transmitter of habitus, through the invisible pedagogy of everyday life.

Cultural studies and hybrid identities: Finally, to understand the contemporary challenges brought by globalisation and migration, we appeal to the contributions of cultural studies (Hall, 1996; Appadurai, 1996) and of critical sociolinguistics (Norton, 2013; Piller, 2016; Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). These frameworks allow us to overcome a static, essentialist vision of identity and to understand identity as a project, as a continuous process of negotiation between multiple belongings and loyalties.

The concept of hybrid identity or 'hyphenated identity' is essential for the analysis of transnational and multicultural families. These children are not simply the 'sum' of two cultures; they are the creators of a new culture, of an original identity space that transcends the dichotomy between the mother tongue and the language of the host country.

1. THE MECHANISMS OF SOCIALISATION: LANGUAGE AS THE ARCHITECT OF IDENTITY

1.1 Socialisation through Language: From Bernstein's Codes to Translanguaging

Of all the instruments that the family places at the child's disposal for the construction of their identity, language is, without doubt, the most powerful. Through language, the child learns to name the world, to express their needs, to negotiate conflicts, to construct a coherent narrative about themselves.

Linguistic Codes and the Reproduction of Inequalities

Basil Bernstein's (1971/2003) contribution remains fundamental for understanding how social class is inscribed in everyday speech. Bernstein distinguishes between:

- Restricted code: Characterised by short sentences, simple grammar, frequent appeal to common presuppositions ('you know what I mean'). It is a particularistic code, anchored in the immediate context. Predominant in working-class families, this code favours group solidarity, but limits the capacity for abstraction and for the expression of nuances.
- Elaborated code: Characterised by complex sentences, rich vocabulary, explication of premises and conclusions. It is a universalistic code, which can be understood independently of context. Predominant in middle and upper-class families, this code prepares the child for the discursive demands of school and of intellectualised professions.

Bernstein does not consider the restricted code as 'inferior' from a linguistic point of view; both codes are equally complex and legitimate in their contexts of use. The problem is that the school functions on the basis of the elaborated code and penalises children who have not been sufficiently exposed to it at home. Educational inequality thus has its roots in discursive inequality within the family.

Gender Polarity in the Transmission of Codes

Here intervenes our central thesis. In the traditional configuration of the family, the mother is the principal agent of early linguistic socialisation.

She spends more time with the child, speaks to them more, reads them stories, answers their questions, corrects pronunciation errors. She is the keeper and transmitter of the linguistic code – whether restricted or elaborated.

The father, on the other hand, is associated with the penetration of the public, formal, institutional code. He is the one who, through his professional occupation and his interactions with the external world, brings into the house a more abstract, more technical language, more detached from the immediate context. He is the mediator between the domestic (particularistic) code and the public (universalistic) code.

This polarity generates a symbolic division of linguistic labour that will be internalised by children:

- Woman = linguistic stability = preservation of the mother tongue, of the dialect, of the local accent;
- Man = linguistic progress = acquisition of the standard language, of foreign languages, of technical vocabulary.

In migrant families, this polarity becomes even more evident. The woman is often the one who preserves and transmits the language of origin to the children, while the man, more exposed to the labour market and to the institutions of the host country, is the principal vehicle of the acquisition of the new language.

Narrative Identity: The Stories We Tell about Ourselves

An essential mechanism of identity construction in the family is storytelling. Through repeated narratives – 'how it was when you were born', 'how the grandparents met', 'what a rascal you were at kindergarten' – the family constructs an official version of the child's identity. These stories are not simple factual accounts; they are identity performances that tell the child: 'This is who you are'. They select certain traits, amplify them, confer upon them narrative coherence, while omitting or minimising others. Here too, the gender polarity is visible. The woman is, as a rule, the guardian of family memory. She is the one who keeps in touch with relatives, who preserves the photographs, who initiates conversations about the past. She ensures the temporal continuity of the family.

The man is associated with projection into the future – with career plans, with investments, with geographical moves that will reconfigure the family destiny.

1.2 Affective Socialisation and Emotional Capital

The internalisation of social norms is not a purely cognitive process. The child does not learn rules only because they are explained; they assimilate them affectively, through identification with parental figures and through the internalisation of the attachment relationship.

John Bowlby (1969) and Mary Ainsworth (1978) demonstrated that secure attachment the fundamental trust that the mother (or the primary caregiver) will be available and responsive constitutes the foundation of healthy psychological development. From this base of security, the child explores the world, assumes cognitive and social risks, develops friendships and, later, couple relationships.

The woman is, in almost all cultures, the principal provider of this base of security. She is the primary attachment figure, and her constant and predictable presence constructs what Giddens (1991) calls ontological trust – the fundamental feeling that the world is a safe and intelligible place.

The man enters this affective equation later. His traditional role is not to offer continuous care, but to mediate the family's relationship with the external world. He is the one who 'confronts' the dangers from outside, who provides resources, who represents the family in the public space. This complementarity – the mother as refuge, the father as guide towards the exterior – is deeply inscribed in the child's psychological structure.

Consequences for the gender identity construction:

- Girls, growing up in the proximity of the mother and identifying with her, will internalise the model of woman as affective anchor and guardian of continuity.
- Boys, in order to construct their masculine identity, must differentiate themselves from the feminine sphere and orient themselves towards the paternal model – autonomy, risk-taking, projection into the future.

1.3 Invisible Pedagogy and the Inheritance of Habitus

The concept of habitus defined by Pierre Bourdieu as a 'system of durable and transposable dispositions' is essential for understanding how the family reproduces social inequalities without this process being explicit or intentional.

Habitus is not transmitted through formal teaching, but through osmosis, through practice, through continuous exposure. The child does not learn 'good taste' because parents give them lectures about art; they learn it by attending to parents' conversations about exhibitions, observing which paintings are hung on the walls, hearing what music is listened to at home.

Embodied Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1984) distinguishes between three forms of cultural capital:

- Embodied capital: knowledge, competencies, tastes that are an integral part of the person (require time to be accumulated, cannot be transmitted instantaneously).
- Objectified capital: cultural goods (books, paintings, musical instruments) that can be transmitted materially.
- Institutionalised capital: diplomas, titles, academic certifications.

The family is the principal producer of embodied cultural capital. It offers the child, through everyday interaction, a repertoire of cognitive and evaluative schemes that will guide perceptions, thinking and action throughout life.

Gender Polarity in the Transmission of Cultural Capital

Here too, our central thesis finds its application. In the traditional configuration:

The woman (the mother) is the principal transmitter of 'basic' cultural capital language, politeness, daily routines, hygiene habits, stories, songs. She ensures the foundation upon which the entire educational edifice will subsequently be constructed. The man (the father) is associated with 'advanced' or 'specialised' cultural capital technical knowledge, politics, finance, science, travel. He is the one who opens windows to cultural worlds situated beyond the borders of the domestic.

This distribution has important consequences for the reproduction of gender inequalities. Girls, having in their mother a model of cultural competence, tend to develop earlier and more solidly linguistic and relational competencies. Boys, in order to access 'masculine' cultural capital, must distance themselves from the maternal sphere and orient themselves towards the paternal model which can generate anxiety and feelings of cultural insecurity.

Cultural Consumption as Social Distinction

Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates that cultural tastes are not neutral; they are markers of class position and instruments of social distinction. The choice of books, games, holiday destinations, TV programmes all these function as exercises in marking class identity.

The family teaches the child what is 'beautiful', 'distinguished' or 'vulgar' , what is 'serious' or 'superficial' , what is 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' for someone of 'our kind'. These aesthetic and moral evaluations are embodied they become part of spontaneous reactions, of sensations of pleasure or disgust, of the 'natural' inclinations of the individual.

In this domain too, the gender polarity manifests subtly. The woman is often the guardian of domestic good taste what furniture fits, what colours are harmonious, what food is 'cooked by the book'. The man is associated with technological tastes and with public cultural consumption – what car to buy, what computer to choose, what films to see at the cinema.

2. THE FAMILY AS CULTURAL MEDIATOR AND DISTRIBUTOR OF CAPITAL

2.1 The familial filter in the face of global culture

One of the most significant transformations of the socialising function of the family in the contemporary era is the loss of monopoly over information and values. If in traditional societies the family was the principal and often the only source of knowledge about the world, in the globalised and digitalised society children are exposed, from the most tender ages, to a continuous flux of cultural messages coming from multiple and often contradictory sources.

In this context, the family no longer functions as an exclusive producer of meaning, but as a filter, a mediator between the global cultural universe and the particular experience of the child. It selects, hierarchises and interprets cultural messages according to its own value system.

The gender polarity in this mediation function is evident:

- The woman tends to be the guardian of traditional values, filtering external influences through the prism of continuity and stability. She is the one who says: 'In our family we don't do it like that' or 'Grandma taught us differently'.
- The man tends to be the promoter of cultural innovation, open to new trends and eager to adopt emerging technologies. He is the one who brings the first computer into the house, who proposes exotic holiday destinations, who encourages children to learn foreign languages and to study abroad.

This complementarity – the woman as brake (in a positive sense, as keeper of identity), the man as accelerator (in a positive sense, as opener of new horizons) – can be a source of balance and cultural richness for the child. It can, however, also become a source of conflict when the polarisation is too accentuated or when the values of the two parents are fundamentally incompatible.

2.2 Transnational Families and the Reconfiguration of Identities

A particular and extremely significant case of this mediation function is represented by transnational and multicultural families. In these families, the conflict between stability and change, between tradition and innovation, between the mother tongue and the language of the host country is explicit and daily.

Family Language Policy

Bilingual and multilingual families confront a fundamental decision: what language to speak at home? The answer to this question is not only linguistic; it is profoundly political and identity-related.

Spolsky (2012) and Curdt-Christiansen (2018) have developed the concept of family language policy to describe these explicit and implicit negotiations. The strategies are multiple:

- OPOL (One Person, One Language): Each parent consistently speaks their own mother tongue with the child. This strategy, although apparently equitable, places a significant cognitive burden on the child and requires considerable linguistic discipline from the parents.
- mL@H (Minority Language at Home): The family speaks the language of origin (minority) at home, leaving the acquisition of the majority language to the school and to the public space. This strategy prioritises identity preservation over rapid integration.
- Code-switching and translanguaging: In practice, the majority of bilingual families do not strictly respect any rule, but alternate and blend languages according to context, interlocutor and subject.

Gender Polarity in Transnational Families

Research in the field of family language policy (Piller, 2016; Norton, 2013) reveals a consistent gender polarity in the attribution of linguistic responsibilities:

The woman (the mother) is, in the vast majority of cases, the principal agent of the transmission of the language of origin. She is the one who speaks to the children in the mother tongue, who reads them stories in this language, who maintains telephone contact with grandparents in the country of origin. She is the keeper of the affective language, the language of intimacy and tradition.

The man (the father) is more exposed to the language of the host country through the labour market and institutional interactions. He is, often, the one who adopts the new language more rapidly and who mediates the family's relationship with institutions (school, administration, health). He is the agent of linguistic integration.

This polarity generates specific tensions. Children may begin to refuse the mother tongue in favour of the majority language, perceiving the former as a barrier to social integration.

This refusal is experienced by the mother as a betrayal – a denial of her identity and of her effort of cultural preservation. The father, less affectively invested in the language of origin, may be perceived as an accomplice to this betrayal.

Translanguaging and Hybrid Identity

The concept of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) describes the practice by which bilingual speakers flexibly blend resources from both languages to create meaning, without respecting the rigid boundaries between 'language 1' and 'language 2'.

In transnational families, translanguaging is not only a communicative strategy; it is an identity performance. The child who alternates between Romanian and Italian, between English and Bengali, not only solves a vocabulary problem; they construct and negotiate an identity that is neither exclusively 'Romanian' nor exclusively 'Italian', but Romanian-Italian – a hybrid, hyphenated identity that transcends traditional dichotomies.

The result is not a diluted or confused identity, but a complex, flexible and reflexive identity – capable of navigating between different cultural contexts, of adopting multiple perspectives, of translating not only words, but also cultural meanings.

This capacity for identity negotiation – which we call 'intercultural competence' – is, perhaps, the most valuable inheritance that the transnational family can offer the child. It represents a superior form of cultural capital, specific to the era of globalisation.

3. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: SOCIALISATION IN CRISIS OR RECONFIGURATION?

3.1 The Crisis of Traditional Models and the Emergence of New Archetypes

The traditional model of socialisation – mother at home, father at work, the authoritarian transmission of values from one generation to another – is evidently in crisis. This crisis does not, however, mean the disappearance of the socialising function of the family, but its profound reconfiguration.

The impact of divorce and reconstituted families

The increase in the divorce rate and the emergence of reconstituted families (formed through the remarriage of one or both partners) have major consequences on the socialisation process:

- Multiplication of parental figures: The child may have two, three or even four parents/parental figures (biological mother, biological father, stepmother, stepfather), each with their own socialisation style, their own value system, their own expectations. This multiplication can be a source of confusion and loyalty conflict, but it can also be an opportunity for the child to develop superior negotiation competencies and cognitive flexibility.
- Contradictory identity discourses: In reconstituted families, the child is exposed to different, often contradictory, narratives about their own history and identity. What is valued in the mother's house may be devalued in the father's house; what is permitted with one parent is forbidden with the other. This experience of the relativity of norms can lead either to a profound identity crisis or to a premature reflexive consciousness of the constructed character of social rules.
- Reconfiguration of gender polarity: In single-parent families headed by women, the mother is simultaneously actor of stability and factor of progress. She ensures affective and cultural continuity, but is also uniquely responsible for the family's social integration and professional success. This overlap of roles can be a source of exhaustion and stress, but also an opportunity for children to witness a feminine model of dual competence – affective and instrumental.

Gender Polarity in New Family Configurations

Our central thesis – woman as actor of stability, man as factor of progress does not disappear in new family configurations, but is reconfigured and, in certain cases, accentuated.

In reconstituted families, for example, the biological mother remains almost invariably the affective anchor and the guardian of family memory. She is the one who preserves the photographs, who tells the child about their first days, who maintains contact with the grandmother. The stepfather, if present,

is often invested with the role of opener of new horizons – he brings new hobbies, new holiday destinations, new perspectives on career and future.

This distribution of roles can generate specific tensions. The mother may experience the presence of the new partner as competition for the children's hearts; the stepfather may be perceived as an intruder attempting to replace an idealised paternal model. Children navigate between multiple loyalties, learning to translate and mediate between divergent identity discourses.

3.2 Competition with Screens: Digital Socialisation and the Decline of Parental Monopoly

The most dramatic transformation of the socialisation landscape in the last two decades is, without doubt, the digital revolution. For the first time in human history, children have direct, unfiltered and continuous access to cultural fluxes that completely elude parental control.

Horizontal Socialisation and the Rise of Influencers

The concept of horizontal socialisation describes the process by which children and adolescents model their values, behaviours and aspirations not through vertical transmission (from parents to children), but through interaction with the peer group and, in the digital age, with online influencers.

YouTubers, TikTokers, gamers and virtual celebrities have become, for millions of children, reference figures more important than parents or teachers. They not only offer models of behaviour and lifestyles; they define what is 'cool', 'relevant' and 'desirable' in a language and aesthetic accessible to children, but often completely inaccessible to adults.

Gender polarity in digital socialisation is fascinating and complex:

- The woman (the mother) is, in general, more distant from the child's digital universe. The difference in digital competencies between mothers and children is often greater than between fathers and children. The mother may be perceived as anachronistic, 'not share', incapable of understanding the virtual world in which the child spends a large part of their time.
- The man (the father) usually has greater familiarity with digital technology, especially with video games and electronic devices.

He can be a play partner in the digital universe, a mediator between the child and technology. This technological proximity can consolidate his traditional role as factor of progress and opener of new horizons.

The Displacement of Linguistic Authority

A crucial consequence of the digital revolution is the displacement of linguistic authority from adults towards the peer group and towards online influencers. Adolescent slang, emojis, memes, abbreviations and new forms of visual communication constitute a parallel linguistic system, with its own grammatical and pragmatic rules, which is dominated by young people and inaccessible to adults.

The parent who does not know the difference between 'lol' and 'lmao', who does not understand the meaning of a certain emoji, who cannot decode the irony of a meme, loses linguistic authority. They are no longer the privileged source of linguistic knowledge; they are, on the contrary, the ignorant one who must be educated by the child.

Here too, the gender polarity manifests itself. Mothers are, in general, more distant from this new digital language; fathers, especially those involved in gaming or technology, have greater chances to understand it and, sometimes, even to use it.

The Family as a Space of Digital Resistance or Adaptation

In the face of this unprecedented challenge, families adopt different strategies:

- The prohibition strategy: Drastic limitation of access to digital devices, banning of social networks, strict monitoring of consumed content. This strategy, although it may protect the child in the short term, disadvantages them in the long term, excluding them from the digital competencies essential for social and professional integration.
- The laissez-faire strategy: Unlimited access, absence of any monitoring or guidance. This strategy exposes the child to significant risks (cyberbullying, inappropriate content, digital addiction) and misses the opportunity to transform technology into an instrument of learning and development.

- The active mediation strategy: Parents engage in co-use of technology with children, critically discuss consumed content, establish clear and negotiated rules, develop their own digital competencies in order to function as mentors and not as censors.

Gender polarity in the choice of strategy is evident. Mothers tend to be more prohibitive and more worried about digital risks. Fathers tend to be more permissive and more confident in the benefits of technology. The most effective strategy is, of course, complementarity – the mother who sets limits and signals risks, the father who opens opportunities and mediates access.

3.3 The Crisis Of Gender Models and the Emergence of New Archetypes

Perhaps the most profound transformation of the socialising function of the family in the contemporary era is the decoupling of biological sex from the social gender role. If in the traditional model the child learned what it means to be 'man' or 'woman' through the direct observation of their parents – the mother as caregiver, the father as provider – in contemporary society this correlation is increasingly weak and contested.

Mothers who are also factors of progress

Contemporary women – including mothers – have massively penetrated traditionally masculine spheres: career, politics, science, technology, high-performance sport. They are no longer only anchors of stability; they are also agents of change, pathbreakers, innovators. This double identity – woman as keeper of tradition and, simultaneously, as pioneer of progress – creates for girls complex and rich identification models. A little girl can admire in her mother both affective and relational competence, and professional success and financial independence. This positive bipolarity is an essential identity resource for young women of the twenty-first century.

Fathers Who are also Anchors of Stability

In parallel, we are witnessing the emergence of new paternities.

More and more fathers assume traditionally feminine roles: extended paternity leaves, care of young children, involvement in affective education, participation in domestic tasks. These fathers are factors of stability – they offer continuity, presence, care. They demonstrate that masculinity is not incompatible with vulnerability, with tenderness, with dedication to domestic life.

Children as Negotiators of New Gender Identities

For children growing up in such families, gender identity is no longer a destiny, but a reflexive project. They do not passively take over parental models; they observe them, compare them, evaluate them and, finally, construct their own repertoire of masculine and feminine behaviours.

These children are less constrained by gender stereotypes than any previous generation. They can aspire to careers and lifestyles that, for their grandparents, were unattainable. They can construct couple relationships based on partnership and negotiation, not on hierarchy and submission.

The traditional polarity – woman as stability, man as progress – does not disappear, but is dialecticised. It becomes a symbolic resource that individuals can selectively mobilise, according to context and their own aspirations, and not a rigid constraint dictating their destiny.

CONCLUSIONS: THE FAMILY AS A SPACE OF IDENTITY NEGOTIATION BETWEEN STABILITY AND CHANGE

Synthesis of Arguments

This journey through the fine mechanisms of family socialisation and identity construction has allowed us to formulate and sustain several essential conclusions.

Firstly, we have demonstrated that the family remains the fundamental site of identity construction, despite and perhaps even because of contemporary challenges. Neither the school, nor the peer group, nor the digital environment can replace the affective and symbolic matrix that the family offers in the first years of life.

Secure attachment, the internalisation of language, the formation of habitus – all these essential processes take place within the bosom of the family and bear its imprint for the rest of life. Secondly, we have highlighted the fundamental gender polarity that structures this socialisation process. In the symbolic economy of the traditional and modern family, the woman (the mother) functions as the main actor of stability keeper of the mother tongue, guardian of family memory, affective anchor, guarantor of cultural continuity. The man (the father) functions as the main factor of progress – mediator with the external world, agent of change, promoter of cultural and technological innovation, opener of new horizons.

Thirdly, we have demonstrated that this polarity is not a simple anthropological curiosity, but has profound consequences on the distribution of cultural and linguistic capital in the family, on the way in which children internalise their own gender identities and on the capacity of the family institution to respond to contemporary challenges.

Fourthly, we have analysed the major challenges to this traditional model: the crisis of the nuclear family and the emergence of alternative configurations (single-parent, reconstituted, transnational families); the digital revolution and competition with horizontal socialisation; the contestation of gender stereotypes and the emergence of non-traditional parental models.

Fifthly, we have shown that these challenges do not mean the disappearance of the socialising function of the family, but its profound reconfiguration. The contemporary family no longer transmits a fixed and immutable set of values and identities; it becomes a space of negotiation in which the child learns to navigate between multiple belongings and loyalties, to construct their own identity through the creative synthesis of the diverse influences to which they are exposed.

Central Thesis: From Transmission to Mediation

We formulate, in conclusion, the central thesis of this chapter:

Instead of disappearing, the socialisation function of the family is fundamentally transformed: from a function of authoritarian transmission of a unique and immutable identity model, to a function of reflexive mediation between multiple possible models.

The contemporary family no longer tells the child 'Who you must be'; it offers them the instruments linguistic, cultural, emotional to negotiate their own place in a hyper-complex and continuously changing world. This transformation has profound implications for our understanding of the family and of gender roles.

For women, this transformation means liberation from the exclusive capsule of stability. Contemporary women can be and are simultaneously affective anchors and agents of change, keepers of tradition and pathbreakers. They are no longer constrained to choose between career and family, between progress and stability; they can negotiate and combine these roles in creative and personal ways.

For men, this transformation means rediscovery of the affective and domestic dimension of masculine identity. Contemporary men can be and are simultaneously providers and caregivers, factors of progress and anchors of stability. They can be present at the birth of their children, change nappies, read bedtime stories, be vulnerable and tender – without losing their masculine status.

For children, this transformation means access to a richer and more flexible repertoire of identity models. They are no longer forced to conform to rigid gender patterns; they can explore, experiment and construct their own versions of masculinity and femininity. They can admire in their mother both professional competence and tenderness; in their father, both ambition and patience. This richness of models is the most valuable inheritance that the contemporary family can offer them.

Interdisciplinary Contribution

This chapter is situated at the intersection of several fields and aims to contribute to each of them:

For sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, we offer a theorisation of gender polarity in the transmission of linguistic codes and an application of the concept of family language policy to the specific context of transnational and multicultural families. We demonstrate that linguistic decisions in the family are not neutral, but profoundly charged with identity and gender meanings.

For cultural studies, we offer an analysis of the family as a space of cultural mediation between tradition and innovation, between local and global, between inherited culture and aspirational culture. We introduce the concept of hybrid identity and demonstrate that this is not a diluted or confused form of identity, but a superior identity configuration, specific to the era of globalisation.

For gender studies and feminism, we offer an original theorisation of the stability/progress polarity as a fundamental structure of family socialisation. We deconstruct this polarity, showing both its oppressive consequences and its emancipatory potential when it is dialecticised and reflexively assumed.

For social psychology and family sociology, we offer a comprehensive synthesis of socialisation theories, from symbolic interactionism to systemic theory, from Bernstein's sociolinguistics to Bourdieu's theory of habitus. We integrate these perspectives into a unitary framework and apply them to contemporary challenges: digitalisation, migration, the diversification of family forms.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present chapter has, of course, its limitations, which must be acknowledged and which open fertile directions for future research.

Firstly, our analysis has focused predominantly on the heterosexual nuclear family in the European space. Future research must extend this analysis to:

- Single-parent families and how the stability/progress polarity is reconfigured in the absence of one of the parents;
- Same-sex families and how two mothers or two fathers negotiate the attribution of stability and progress roles;
- Extended families and the role of grandparents, aunts and uncles in the socialisation process;
- Non-Western contexts and how different cultural traditions configure the gender polarity in family socialisation.

Secondly, although we have extensively discussed digital socialisation, this dimension requires much more in-depth research, especially from the perspective of gender polarity.

How do fathers and mothers construct their digital competencies? How does this difference in competencies influence the relationship with children and parental authority? How are the roles of stability and progress reconfigured in the digital era?

Thirdly, our research has privileged the synchronic dimension over the diachronic one. Longitudinal studies are necessary to follow the same children over several years to understand how the habitus acquired in the family sediments and transforms throughout adult life.

Fourthly, although we have formulated a theory of reflexive socialisation, this remains largely at the theoretical level and requires empirical validation. How do we measure 'identity negotiation capacity'? How do we evaluate the 'intercultural competence' acquired in transnational families? What are the factors that facilitate or hinder the development of these reflexive competencies?

Fifthly, our analysis has only tangentially addressed the economic dimension of family socialisation. How do economic inequalities between families translate into inequalities of cultural and linguistic capital? How do parental work schedules, job insecurity or unemployment affect the quantity and quality of socialisation interactions? How do social policies (parental leave, childcare services, family allowances) facilitate or hinder the reflexive socialisation we advocate? These questions require an articulation between our micro-sociological perspective and a macro-sociological analysis of social inequalities and public policies.

Sixthly, the spatial dimension of family socialisation – the organisation of domestic space, the distribution of territories of responsibility, the materiality of the home as a vector of identity transmission – has been only briefly mentioned. An interdisciplinary dialogue with architecture and spatial studies could enrich our understanding of how the built environment participates in the construction of gender identities and in the negotiation of stability and progress roles.

Coda: The Future of Family Socialisation

We conclude this chapter with a reflection on the future.

In the face of the unprecedented challenges of the digital era artificial intelligence, virtual reality, recommendation algorithms that shape children's tastes and aspirations from infancy – many wonder whether the family still has any future as a socialising institution. Our answer is yes, but not just any family.

The future does not belong to the family that desperately attempts to resuscitate traditional models of socialisation – authoritarian, unidirectional, closed. These attempts are doomed to failure, because the world in which today's children will be adults is radically different from the world in which their parents grew up.

The future belongs to the family that understands that its role is no longer to transmit a fixed set of values and identities, but to equip the child with the necessary instruments to construct meaning for themselves in a hyper-complex and continuously changing world.

These instruments are:

- Language – not only as a communication system, but as a resource for critical thinking and nuanced expression of the self;
- Secure attachment – as a base of safety from which the child can explore the world and assume cognitive and social risks;
- Cultural capital – not as a rigid inheritance, but as a flexible repertoire of cognitive and evaluative schemes;
- Intercultural competence – the capacity to translate between different systems of meaning and to navigate between multiple identities;
- Reflexivity – the capacity to critically examine one's own beliefs and values and to revise them in the light of new experiences.

The woman as actor of stability, the man as factor of progress – this polarity will not disappear, but will be dialecticised. It will become a symbolic resource that new generations will be able to mobilise selectively, creatively, reflexively.

Women will continue to be guardians of memory and continuity, but they will also be pathbreakers and innovators. Men will continue to be agents of change and mediators with the exterior, but they will also be affective anchors and present caregivers. The family of the future will be neither a fortress against change, nor a clone of global cultural trends.

It will be a space of dialogue between stability and change, between tradition and innovation, between inherited heritage and constructed

future. And in this dialogue, both woman and man have essential and complementary roles to play.

The fundamental question is no longer whether the family will survive, but what kind of family will survive – and what kind of family we want to survive. The answer to this question is not only sociological or psychological; it is deeply political and ethical. It depends on the social policies we adopt, the educational systems we build, the cultural representations we produce and consume, the values we choose to transmit to future generations.

The family is not a natural object, given once and for all. It is a social and historical construction, perpetually reinvented by each generation. And because it is a construction, it can be deconstructed and reconstructed differently. This deconstruction and reconstruction – painful, conflictual, uncertain – is the task of our generation. And it is a task that concerns not only the family, but the entire society.

For the family, in its intimacy and its privacy, is the mirror of the world. The inequalities, conflicts and hopes that traverse society are reflected, amplified or mitigated within its walls. To transform the family is to transform society; to transform society is to transform the family. The two projects are inseparable.

This is why the study of the family – of its language, its silences, its routines, its rituals, its conflicts, its loves – is not a marginal or anecdotal academic specialisation. It is a privileged access route to understanding the deepest structures of social life and the most intimate mechanisms of human freedom.

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CHAPTER 2
GENDER, CULTURE, AND POWER RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The study of women and gender is inherently a study of power. To examine the nexus of gender, culture, and power relations is to unravel the invisible threads that dictate human behavior, social hierarchy, and institutional access. For decades, feminist scholars have argued that gender is not a biological destiny but a sophisticated cultural performance (Butler, 1990). Culture, in this sense, acts as both the stage and the script, providing the norms, symbols, and values that define what it means to be a "man" or a "woman." However, these definitions are never neutral; they are deeply embedded in power relations that historically favor certain identities while marginalizing others (Walby, 1990).

Central to this discussion is the understanding that power is not merely a top-down force exercised by the state or the law, but a "capillary" phenomenon that permeates everyday life (Foucault, 1978). It exists in the way we speak, the way we occupy physical space, and the way labor is divided within the household. Culture serves as the primary mechanism through which these power imbalances are naturalized and maintained. When a particular gender role is labeled as "natural" or "traditional," it often masks an underlying structure of dominance that limits the agency of individuals (Hooks, 2000).

This chapter will analyze the triad of gender, culture, and power by employing an intersectional lens. It moves beyond a monolithic "woman's experience" to acknowledge how race, class, and colonial history complicate the dynamics of power (Crenshaw, 1989). By deconstructing the cultural myths that sustain gender inequality, we can begin to identify the sites of resistance where power is being reclaimed and redefined in the 21st century.

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: PATRIARCHY, POWER, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

To critically analyze the dynamics of gender within culture, one must engage with the theoretical frameworks that have shaped Women's Studies over the last half-century. These theories provide the analytical tools necessary to move beyond surface-level observations of inequality and instead examine the deep-seated structures that sustain it.

Theorizing Patriarchy as a Social System

The concept of patriarchy is fundamental to understanding gendered power relations. Walby (1990) defines patriarchy not as a series of individual acts of discrimination, but as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. This system operates through six distinct structures: the household, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions. By viewing patriarchy as a structural phenomenon, we can see how culture is utilized to institutionalize male privilege. For instance, the "private/public" divide where the domestic sphere is coded as female and the political/economic sphere as male is a primary mechanism for limiting women's access to formal power (Walby, 1990).

Foucault and the Capillary Nature of Power

While traditional feminism often focused on sovereign power (laws and states), Michel Foucault's (1978) work shifted the focus toward "discursive power." Foucault argued that power is not something held by one group over another, but a web of relations that produces "truths" about the body and identity. In the context of gender, power is exercised through "regimes of truth" that dictate what is considered "normal" femininity or masculinity. This power is "capillary" it reaches into the smallest gestures, habits, and self-perceptions of individuals. Through this lens, we can understand how cultural practices like beauty standards or linguistic norms are not just "traditions," but sophisticated methods of discipline and social control (Foucault, 1978).

Intersectionality: The Multiplicity of Oppression

A significant turning point in Women's Studies was the emergence of Intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), this theory challenges the notion of a universal "woman" whose experience is primarily defined by gender alone. Intersectionality posits that social identities such as race, class, gender, and sexuality overlap to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. For example, a woman of color in a post-colonial society does not experience "sexism plus racism" as two separate entities; rather, she experiences a specific, integrated form of oppression that is different from that of a white woman or a man of color.

This theoretical shift is crucial for understanding power relations because it reveals how certain feminist movements, by focusing solely on gender, have historically ignored the power imbalances created by class and white supremacy (Crenshaw, 1989).

Agency and the Subversion of Identity

Finally, Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a framework for understanding how power is both maintained and resisted. Butler argues that gender has no ontological status; it is only real to the extent that it is performed through repetitive acts. If gender is a performance, then it is also a site of subversion. By "misperforming" gender or disrupting cultural expectations, individuals can challenge the very foundations of patriarchal power. This perspective allows us to see culture not just as a cage, but as a space where power relations are constantly being negotiated and potentially overturned (Butler, 1990).

2. CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER: NORMS, SOCIALIZATION, AND IDENTITY

The social construction of gender is a foundational concept in Women’s Studies, asserting that the characteristics, behaviors, and roles we associate with masculinity and femininity are not biological imperatives but products of specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. Unlike "sex," which refers to biological and physiological characteristics, "gender" is a social status and a personal identity that is "done" or performed within a cultural framework (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This section explores the intricate mechanisms through which culture creates the illusion of a natural gender binary and how these constructions serve to maintain existing power hierarchies.

The Process of Gender Socialization: From Infancy to Identity

Gender construction begins long before an individual can articulate their own identity. Through the process of socialization, cultural norms are internalized so deeply that they appear innate. Lorber (1994) argues that "gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes," yet it is actually a result of constant social signaling and reinforcement.

Primary socialization occurs within the family, where parents often subconsciously treat infants differently based on perceived sex—using softer tones and emphasizing beauty for girls, while encouraging physical exploration and resilience in boys. This is further reinforced by the "material culture" of childhood. The gendered distribution of toys, clothing colors, and even bedroom décor acts as an early curriculum for adult roles. Toys for boys frequently emphasize agency, spatial skills, and professional achievement (e.g., building blocks, science kits), whereas toys for girls often revolve around domesticity and "affective labor" (e.g., dolls, kitchen sets). This early conditioning prepares individuals for the "gendered division of labor" that characterizes adult institutional life.

Challenging the Universal: Cross-Cultural Variations and Colonialism

The most compelling evidence for the cultural construction of gender is found in its immense variability across different societies. If gender were biological, its expression would be uniform; however, anthropological data reveals a vast spectrum of gendered existence. Margaret Mead's (1935) pioneering work in Papua New Guinea demonstrated that the "aggressive" and "emotional" traits we assign to specific genders in the West are entirely absent or reversed in other cultures. In the Arapesh tribe, both men and women displayed what Westerners would call "feminine" maternal traits, while in the Mundugumor, both genders were expected to be fierce and aggressive. Furthermore, the "Gender Binary" the rigid division into only two categories—is increasingly recognized by scholars as a product of Western "colonial modernity." Lugones (2007) posits that many indigenous societies possessed sophisticated, non-binary gender systems prior to colonial intervention. For example, the *Muxe* of the Zapotec in Mexico, the *Fa'afafine* in Samoa, and the five-gender system of the Bugis in Indonesia represent cultural realities where gender is fluid and not tied to a male/female dichotomy. The global imposition of the binary system was a tool of colonial power used to categorize and control colonized bodies, effectively erasing indigenous "gender-diverse" cultures in favor of a European patriarchal model.

Language and the Symbolic Order

Culture constructs gender through the "symbolic order," primarily through language. Language is not merely a tool for description; it is a mechanism of power that shapes our perception of reality. Many languages are inherently "gendered," possessing masculine and feminine nouns that force speakers to constantly categorize the world through a binary lens. Beauvoir (1949) famously noted that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," highlighting how cultural discourse defines "Woman" as "The Other." In patriarchal linguistic structures, the "masculine" is often treated as the universal or the default (e.g., the use of "mankind" to refer to all humans), while the "feminine" is marked as a deviation or a subset. This linguistic marginalization reinforces the cultural idea that men occupy the center of human experience while women are peripheral. The way we name things or fail to name them determines the boundaries of what is socially possible for different genders.

Doing Gender: Performance and Social Surveillance

The construction of gender is not a one-time event but a continuous, lifelong process. West and Zimmerman (1987) introduced the concept of "doing gender," which suggests that gender is an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction. Individuals are constantly "on stage," performing their gender in a way that is accountable to social audiences. This performance is monitored through "social surveillance." When an individual fails to perform their gender according to cultural scripts such as a man showing vulnerability or a woman displaying "unfeminine" ambition they often face social sanctions, ranging from subtle ridicule to physical violence. These sanctions act as the "enforcement arm" of cultural construction, ensuring that the majority of the population adheres to the norms that sustain the patriarchal status quo. By "doing gender" correctly, individuals inadvertently reproduce the very structures of power that limit their own agency.

3. INSTITUTIONALIZED POWER RELATIONS: DOMESTIC, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL SPHERES

Power relations are not merely interpersonal dynamics; they are deeply embedded in the structures of social institutions.

Institutionalization occurs when gendered power imbalances become part of the formal and informal rules that govern society, making inequality appear systematic and inevitable. This section examines how power is codified within the domestic sphere, the labor market, and political systems, and how these institutions collaborate to maintain patriarchal hegemony.

The Domestic Sphere: The Politics of Private Life

Traditional sociological perspectives often viewed the family as a private, harmonious unit outside the realm of power. However, feminist scholars have deconstructed this "myth of the private," revealing the household as a primary site of gendered struggle. Walby (1990) identifies the patriarchal mode of production within the household as a system where women's labor is expropriated by their partners through the domestic and caring work they perform without direct financial compensation. The concept of the "Second Shift," popularized by Hochschild and Machung (1989), highlights that even as women entered the formal workforce, the institutional expectations of the home remained largely unchanged. Women continue to perform a disproportionate amount of "emotional labor" and "mental load" the invisible work of managing a household's needs and emotional well-being. This institutionalized expectation is reinforced by cultural narratives of "maternal instinct" or "natural" feminine nurturing, which serve to mask the labor exploitation inherent in the traditional family structure. Consequently, the domestic sphere becomes a training ground where individuals first learn to navigate and accept gendered hierarchies of power.

Economic Power: Gendered Organizations and the Labor Market

In the economic institution, power relations are manifested through the systematic exclusion or marginalization of women from high-status and high-paying roles. Joan Acker (1990) introduced the theory of "Gendered Organizations," arguing that the very structure of the modern workplace is not gender-neutral. Organizations are built upon the image of an "ideal worker" someone who has no domestic responsibilities and can dedicate their entire life to the firm.

Because this ideal is historically based on the male experience, women who carry reproductive and caregiving responsibilities are structurally disadvantaged. This institutional power is further exercised through two forms of segregation:

- **Horizontal Segregation:** The concentration of women in "pink-collar" jobs (e.g., nursing, teaching, administration) which are systematically undervalued and lower-paid compared to "masculine" sectors like engineering or finance.
- **Vertical Segregation (The Glass Ceiling):** The invisible institutional barriers that prevent women from ascending to top executive or decision-making positions.

The "gender pay gap" is not merely a result of individual choices but is an institutionalized outcome of how "skill" and "value" are defined. Power resides in the ability of those at the top (predominantly men) to define what work is worth, often devaluing tasks associated with femininity while rewarding those associated with traditional masculinity (Acker, 1990).

The Political Sphere: The Politics of Presence and Authority

Political institutions represent the most formal exercise of power. Historically, the public sphere of politics was defined through the exclusion of women, a "sexual contract" that established male citizens as the only legitimate political actors (Pateman, 1988). Although formal barriers to voting and holding office have largely been removed, political power relations remain heavily skewed. Phillips (1995) discusses the "Politics of Presence," arguing that the descriptive representation of women in parliaments and cabinets is essential for challenging the male-centric agenda of the state. However, institutional power often resists this change through "symbolic representation" or "tokenism," where a few women are allowed into the corridors of power but are expected to adhere to masculine norms of leadership. Furthermore, the state itself acts as a gendered institution through its policies. Legal systems that fail to adequately address gender-based violence, or economic policies that cut social welfare (which disproportionately affects women as primary caregivers), are exercises of state power that maintain patriarchal order.

The state often acts as a regulator of the "sexual contract," using its authority to police women's reproductive choices and reinforce the traditional family unit as the primary source of social stability (Pateman, 1988).

The Intersection of Institutional Power

These institutional spheres domestic, economic, and political do not operate in isolation. They form a "matrix of domination" where power in one sphere reinforces power in another. For example, a woman's lack of economic power (due to the glass ceiling or pay gap) increases her dependence within the domestic sphere, which in turn limits her ability to participate in the political sphere. Institutionalized power relations thus create a feedback loop that sustains inequality. To challenge this, it is not enough to change individual attitudes; the very structures of these institutions must be dismantled and reimagined through an intersectional lens that accounts for how class, race, and colonial history further complicate these power dynamics (Crenshaw, 1989).

4. GENDER AND THE BODY: DISCIPLINING THE PHYSICAL SELF

In the landscape of gender studies, the body is rarely viewed as a mere biological vessel. Instead, it is understood as a "socially constructed" entity that is inscribed with cultural meanings and subjected to institutional discipline. As Foucault (1978) famously theorized, modern power operates not through brute force, but through "biopower" the regulation of the physical body to ensure it remains productive, docile, and compliant with social norms. For women, the body has historically served as the primary site of both patriarchal control and cultural surveillance.

The "Docile Body" and the Tyranny of Slenderness

One of the most profound ways culture exercises power over the gendered body is through aesthetic standards. Susan Bordo (1993) expands on the concept of the "docile body," arguing that contemporary Western culture produces women who are "self-policing" subjects. Femininity is often equated with a woman's ability to manage and transform her physical appearance according to idealized standards of beauty, youth, and slenderness.

This is not a trivial pursuit of fashion; it is a form of "aesthetic labor" that demands significant time, financial resources, and psychological energy. The prevalence of disordered eating and the normalization of invasive cosmetic procedures represent the internalization of patriarchal power. When a woman monitors her calorie intake or pursues surgical enhancement to meet a cultural ideal, she is participating in a "panoptic" system of surveillance where she is both the prisoner and the guard (Bordo, 1993). This focus on the external body serves to distract from political and economic agency, reinforcing a hierarchy where a woman's value is tied to her visual consumption.

Reproductive Politics and State Surveillance

The most direct intervention of institutional power occurs in the realm of reproduction. Control over the female reproductive system is a central mechanism for state and patriarchal dominance. Whether through the criminalization of abortion, the restriction of contraceptive access, or historically, the forced sterilization of marginalized and indigenous women, the body becomes a tool for national, demographic, or racial agendas. This "politics of the womb" demonstrates that bodily autonomy is a gendered privilege. As bell hooks (2000) argues, reproductive freedom is a fundamental pillar of feminist struggle because without control over one's own body, all other forms of agency political, economic, or social are precarious. Cultural narratives that equate "womanhood" exclusively with "motherhood" serve to naturalize this surveillance, making the state's regulation of reproductive health appear as a protective measure rather than an exercise of power (Hooks, 2000).

Violence and the Spatial Policing of the Body

Power relations are also maintained through the threat and reality of gender-based violence. Violence, or the fear thereof, acts as a "spatial police," limiting where women can go, how they can dress, and how they can occupy public space. Sylvia Walby (1990) identifies male violence as one of the six key structures of patriarchy, noting that it is not a set of isolated incidents but a systemic tool used to maintain social order. When a society tolerates or trivializes violence against women, it communicates that the female body is a site that can be violated with impunity.

Furthermore, cultural practices such as "victim-blaming" shift the responsibility of the violence from the perpetrator to the victim's body—scrutinizing her clothing or her presence in "masculine" spaces. This ensures that women remain in a state of hyper-vigilance, effectively restricting their freedom of movement and reinforcing their dependence on "protective" patriarchal structures (Walby, 1990).

The Body as a Site of Resistance

While the body is a site of discipline, it is also a site of resistance. Reclaiming the body through movements like "body positivity," the fight for reproductive justice, and the public performance of non-binary identities challenges the "biopolitics" of gender. When individuals refuse to adhere to disciplined aesthetic or reproductive norms, they disrupt the cultural script of femininity. As Butler (1990) suggests, by "misperforming" the expected bodily gestures and styles of gender, individuals can expose the artificiality of these power structures and open up new possibilities for bodily sovereignty.

5. RESISTANCE AND AGENCY: NEGOTIATING POWER AND CHALLENGING HEGEMONY

While the preceding sections have outlined the pervasive nature of patriarchal and institutional power, a comprehensive analysis of gender must also account for agency the capacity of individuals to act independently and make free choices within or against restrictive structures. Power is rarely absolute; where there is power, there is resistance (Foucault, 1978). This section examines the diverse ways in which women and marginalized groups navigate, negotiate, and resist cultural and institutional hegemony in both physical and digital spaces.

Defining Agency: Beyond Passive Victimhood

In earlier feminist discourse, women were often portrayed as passive victims of patriarchal structures. However, contemporary Women’s Studies, influenced by post-colonial and third-world feminism, emphasizes a more nuanced understanding of agency. Saba Mahmood (2005) challenges the Western liberal definition of agency as merely "resistance to norms."

She argues that agency can also be found in the "politics of piety" and the intentional inhabitation of traditional roles for personal or spiritual fulfillment. This perspective is crucial for an international book chapter as it prevents the imposition of a singular Western feminist model of "liberation" and acknowledges that power is negotiated differently across diverse cultural contexts.

Collective Resistance and Social Movements

The most visible form of resistance is collective action. From the suffragette movements of the 19th century to the contemporary "Women, Life, Freedom" protests in Iran, collective resistance challenges the institutionalized power of the state and religious authorities. These movements utilize "counter-hegemonic" discourses to redefine cultural values. By organizing across class and racial lines though often fraught with the challenges of intersectionality social movements transform individual grievances into a unified political force that can demand legislative change, such as the right to bodily autonomy or equal pay (Hooks, 2000).

Digital Activism and the "Fourth Wave"

The advent of digital technology has revolutionized the geography of resistance. The "Fourth Wave" of feminism is characterized by its use of social media to mobilize global solidarity. Hashtag activism, such as #MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, or #BlackLivesMatter, has allowed women to bypass traditional gatekeepers in media and politics to share their lived experiences of power imbalance.

Digital spaces provide a platform for:

- **Narrative Subversion:** Challenging mainstream cultural representations through self-curated content.
- **Transnational Solidarity:** Connecting local struggles to global networks, ensuring that localized gender-based violence or oppression receives international scrutiny.
- **Safe Spaces:** Creating digital enclaves where marginalized groups can develop their own "counter-publics" and linguistic codes to resist surveillance (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

However, digital agency is a double-edged sword, as these same platforms can be used for state surveillance or "manosphere" counter-activism, highlighting that the digital sphere is an active battlefield of power relations.

Subverting Culture from Within: Art and Language

Resistance also occurs at the symbolic level. Artists and writers use their creative agency to "decolonize the mind" and deconstruct gendered stereotypes. By utilizing Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, queer and feminist artists engage in "parodic subversion" performing gender in exaggerated or "incorrect" ways to expose the fragility of cultural norms. In language, resistance is found in the creation of new terminologies that validate diverse identities. The reclaiming of derogatory terms or the invention of inclusive pronouns are acts of linguistic agency that challenge the patriarchal "symbolic order." These micro-acts of resistance, though small in scale, contribute to the gradual erosion of cultural hegemony by making alternative realities visible and speakable.

CONCLUSION

The intricate web of gender, culture, and power relations analyzed in this chapter reveals that inequality is not a static or natural condition, but a dynamic system that is constantly being reconstructed and contested. By moving through the theoretical foundations of patriarchy and intersectionality, we have seen how power transcends mere legal structures to inhabit the "capillary" spaces of daily life our language, our institutions, and our very bodies.

The cultural construction of gender serves as the primary mechanism for naturalizing these hierarchies, yet as this chapter has demonstrated, culture is also the very site where these hierarchies can be dismantled. A key synthesis of this discussion is the recognition that power relations are increasingly globalized yet deeply local. The imposition of Western binaristic models through colonial history continues to clash with indigenous and diverse gender expressions, highlighting the need for a decolonial approach to Women's Studies.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of power in the domestic and economic spheres remains a persistent challenge; as long as the "ideal worker" is defined in opposition to the caregiver, gendered economic disparities will persist regardless of individual merit.

Looking toward the future, several emerging areas demand scholarly attention. First, the impact of Artificial Intelligence and algorithmic bias represents a new frontier for institutionalized power. If the data used to train future systems is embedded with historical patriarchal biases, we risk automating inequality for generations to come. Second, the environmental crisis and "ecofeminism" highlight how the exploitation of nature is conceptually linked to the exploitation of women, suggesting that gender justice is inseparable from climate justice.

Finally, the resilience and agency displayed through digital activism and grassroots social movements offer a roadmap for transformation. While the structures of power are formidable, they are not invincible. As Judith Butler (1990) reminds us, because gender is a performance, it is always open to subversion. The future of gender, culture, and power relations lies in our collective ability to "misperform" the scripts of dominance and to build a cultural framework that values plurality, bodily autonomy, and intersectional equity. In this journey, the study of women remains not just an academic endeavor, but a vital political tool for liberation.

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CHAPTER 3
NEGOTIATING GENDER AND POWER IN A GLOBALISED DIGITAL ERA: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the digital revolution has signalled a paradigm shift in the global architectural framework of social interaction, economic engagement, and the distribution of power. In the Nigerian context, this transformation is particularly complex, as the rapid-fire adoption of mobile technologies and high-speed internet intersects with deeply entrenched socio-cultural hierarchies and patriarchal structures. Nigeria, often cited as Africa's largest technology hub, presents a unique site for academic enquiry; it is a landscape where the "New Economy" of the 21st century meets "Old World" traditionalisms. Bakare (2023) argues, this digital expansion often operates within a "gendered digital architecture" where infrastructure development continues to prioritise male-dominated urban centres, thereby influencing who holds the reins of digital power. While the rhetoric of globalisation frequently centres on the democratisation of information and the flattening of hierarchies, it simultaneously acts as a conduit for "digital hegemony" – a process where global technological standards often ignore local gendered realities or, worse, reinforce them through biased algorithms and Western-centric digital norms.

Central to this discourse is the lived experience of the Nigerian woman. As noted by Okonjo (2021), Nigerian women are increasingly leveraging digital platforms to circumvent traditional "gatekeepers" of power – be they religious leaders, communal patriarchs, or restrictive physical marketplaces. By migrating their social and economic activities to the cloud, women are carving out "third spaces" that offer a semblance of autonomy previously unavailable in physical public squares. However, this digital migration is not without its casualties. The transition has birthed a phenomenon known as "digital domesticity," wherein the same gender roles, stereotypes, and power imbalances that exist offline are seamlessly replicated and often magnified in virtual spaces. Chimuanya and Anyanwu (2021) observe that digital platforms often become "panoptic spaces" where Nigerian women are subjected to intense moral policing, reinforcing traditional feminine archetypes under the guise of digital community. In this digital domesticity, women may find themselves still relegated to "feminised" sectors of the internet or subjected to the same domestic surveillance that restricts their physical mobility.

Furthermore, the negotiation of power in this era is complicated by the intersection of class and geography within Nigeria. The experience of a female tech entrepreneur in Lagos significantly diverges from that of a female farmer in rural Ebonyi attempting to access digital micro-loans. According to Olorunda (2022), while fintech has provided a lifeline for many, the "algorithmic credit scoring" systems used by many Nigerian startups often disadvantage women who lack traditional collateral or formal credit histories. This disparity underscores that the digital revolution is not a monolithic force of liberation. Instead, it is a contested terrain where agency is fought for daily. This chapter critically explores the multifaceted ways in which Nigerian women navigate these tensions. It examines how they leverage digital tools – from social media activism to fintech – to assert their agency, while simultaneously navigating the systemic risks of online gender-based violence (OGBV), digital surveillance, and the cultural backlash that often follows the disruption of traditional power dynamics. By centring on the Nigerian experience, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of how gender relations are being rewritten in the globalised digital era.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter utilises Intersectionality Theory alongside Digital Feminism to decode the complexities of female agency in the digital age. Intersectionality, pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw and robustly Expanded in the African context by scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997), it serves as a critical tool for analysing how multiple social identities – specifically gender, class, ethnicity, and religion – converge to shape a Nigerian woman's digital experience. As Amadiume (2020) argues, an African-centered intersectional approach is vital because it recognises that the "Nigerian woman" is not a monolithic category; a woman's ability to negotiate power online is intrinsically tied to her linguistic background, geographic location, and socio-economic status. For instance, the digital barriers faced by a woman in the rural North are compounded not just by gender, but by educational disparities and linguistic exclusion from a predominantly English-speaking internet (Bakare, 2023). Complementing this, Digital Feminism provides an insight to understand the shift from physical protest to virtual mobilisation.

In Nigeria, this is best exemplified by "hashtag activism," where movements such as #ArewaMeToo and #EndSARS have functioned as transformative tools for challenging entrenched power structures (Anyanwu & Chimuanya, 2022). Olorunshola (2021) opined that digital feminism in Nigeria creates a "counter-public" where women can articulate grievances that are often suppressed in mainstream media or traditional family units. By synthesising these theoretical frameworks, the chapter transcends a mere descriptive analysis of technological adoption; instead, it interrogates the entrenched structural power dynamics rooted in both local tradition and global digital capitalism that dictate who is afforded a voice, whose perspectives are prioritised, and whose digital presence is branded as 'subversive' within the Nigerian public sphere. In doing so, it uncovers the ways in which Nigerian women are not merely passive consumers of global technology but are active agents reshaping the digital frontier to challenge systemic marginalisation (Arowolo, 2023; Nnaemeka, 2020)."

2. THE DIGITAL ECONOMY AND ECONOMIC AGENCY

The transition toward a globalised digital economy has served as a catalyst for redefining female economic participation in Nigeria. In a landscape where traditional brick-and-mortar business structures often require significant capital and physical mobility – two factors frequently restricted by patriarchal social norms – the digital sphere offers a decentralised alternative. This shift has not only enabled Nigerian women to enter the marketplace but has also allowed them to reshape the very nature of "work," blending the professional and the private in ways that challenge traditional economic models.

Digital Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion

The proliferation of mobile-first platforms, particularly Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok, has birthed a burgeoning class of "social commerce" entrepreneurs. As Aderemi (2023) argues, these digital tools have significantly lowered the barrier to entry for women in the informal sector, facilitating a "hidden revolution" in female-led micro-enterprises.

By utilising WhatsApp Status or Instagram Reels to market products directly from their homes, Nigerian women are able to balance domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities with active income generation. This digital pivot provides a level of financial autonomy that bypasses the need for formal bank loans or physical storefronts, effectively leveraging social capital into economic power.

The Gender Digital Divide

However, this digital empowerment is not evenly distributed, creating a stratified landscape of opportunity. Despite the progress seen in urban hubs like Lagos and Abuja, access remains fundamentally unequal across geographic and economic lines. The World Bank (2022) highlights a stark reality: rural Nigerian women are 30% less likely to own a smartphone than their male counterparts, a gap driven by lower literacy rates, higher data costs, and cultural preferences that prioritise male tech ownership. This suggests that while globalisation offers tools for agency, it may inadvertently widen the class gap among women, creating a "digital elite" while further marginalising those in the rural hinterlands who lack the infrastructure to participate in the globalised digital era.

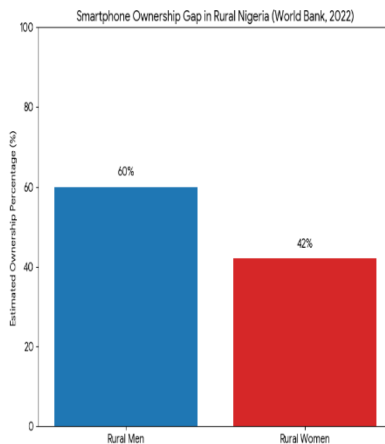

Figure 1. Chart on Smartphone ownership gap in Rural Nigeria

3. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

The digital sphere has emerged as a revolutionary frontier for Nigerian women to reclaim their voices in a political landscape historically dominated by patriarchal gerontocracy. By leveraging decentralized networks, women have moved beyond traditional voter roles to become the architects of socio-political discourse. This shift represents a transition from "peripheral participation" to "digital leadership," where the speed and reach of social media allow for the rapid mobilization of grassroots movements that bypass state-sanctioned narratives.

From #EndSARS to #StateOfEmergency

Digital platforms served as the primary mobilization tool for Nigerian women during recent periods of civil unrest, marking a watershed moment for female-led activism. Eze (2021) notes that women-led groups, most notably the Feminist Coalition, utilized blockchain technology and social media to bypass state-controlled financial and media silos during the 2020 #EndSARS protests. By crowdfunding via cryptocurrency and providing real-time legal and medical aid through Twitter (now X), these women demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of digital logistics that neutralized traditional government suppression tactics. Similarly, the #StateOfEmergency movement against sexual violence highlighted how digital spaces could force legislative attention on gendered issues that were previously marginalized in the National Assembly.

Digital Harassment as Political Silencing

As women occupy more space in the digital political arena, power relations are aggressively reasserted through cyberbullying and coordinated digital attacks. This phenomenon functions as a "digital gatekeeper," intended to drive women back into the private sphere. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES, 2023) reports that Nigerian female politicians and activists face 40% more online gender-based violence (OGBV) than their male counterparts. This harassment-anging from doxxing and character assassination to threats of sexual violence-is a calculated tool for patriarchal dominance.

It seeks to silence dissent by making the cost of digital visibility too high for many women, thereby maintaining the status quo of political exclusion in the virtual age.

4. SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND IDENTITY

The intersection of digital globalization and Nigerian social structures has catalyzed a profound shift in how womanhood is defined, performed, and defended. While traditional Nigerian gender roles often emphasize communal stability and domesticity, the digital era has introduced a decentralized platform where these norms are publicly interrogated. This section explores the tension between inherited cultural scripts and the emerging "globalized" self-concept of the Nigerian woman.

4.1 Challenging "The Good Nigerian Woman" Trope

In many Nigerian social and cultural spheres, the image of the *"Good Nigerian Woman"* is deeply entrenched. This stereotype valorizes subservience, silence, self-sacrifice, and the prioritization of family over individual ambition. It prescribes a narrow set of acceptable behaviours-marriage, motherhood, obedience, and emotional restraint-effectively marginalizing identities that diverge from these prescribed norms. Women who publicly reject or complicate this stereotype have historically been labeled as *rebellious*, *unfeminine*, or *socially disruptive*. This reflects a broader patriarchal framework in which women's social worth is tied to conformity rather than autonomy, a point consistently highlighted in gender criticism literature on Nigerian society.

However, digital platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and TikTok have dramatically shifted the terrain of gendered self-representation in Nigeria. These spaces function as counter-publics-forums where women articulate alternative life narratives that challenge normative expectations. Nigerian women are using visuals, personal testimonies, and community dialogue to normalise career ambition, singlehood, bodily autonomy, protest, and discussions about domestic and intimate life that were once relegated exclusively to private spaces.

Nnaemeka (2020) notes that this digital performance is not merely vanity; it is a subversive act that normalises bodily autonomy. Furthermore, the visibility of non-conforming identities forces a public dialogue on issues previously relegated to "private family matters." For example, the Facebook group Female in Nigeria (FIN), created in the wake of the Chibok girls kidnappings, deliberately provides a no-judgment space for women to share experiences and concerns without shame or stigma. Its very mission – to end a culture of silence and foster collective voice – directly contests the expectation that respectable women "keep private things private."

On platforms like X and Instagram, women content creators and activists routinely post about mental health, career goals, reproductive autonomy, and criticism of marital or relational pressures. Many Nigerian users encounter and engage with such posts daily, often sparking intense debate that pushes previously taboo subjects into the public conversation. Quantitative research in a state, for instance, shows how Facebook and X posts have significantly increased awareness and public discourse around domestic violence and gender-based violence, topics traditionally hidden behind closed doors.

This online visibility is more than cosmetic: it constitutes a form of socio-cultural disruption. Drawing on feminist theory, scholars have argued that when individuals publicly perform identities that refuse to conform – such as women without children, women prioritising professional success, or survivors openly naming abuse – they undermine patriarchal norms by making alternative life choices visible and socially relatable. This aligns with what African feminist theorists describe as digital feminist performance; wherein everyday self-expression becomes a political act that normalises autonomy and challenges traditional power hierarchies.

The consequences of this shift are visible in multiple ways:

- Content creators charting non-conforming journeys gather mass followings, reinforcing the idea that success and respectability need not be predicated on marriage or domestic roles.
- Movements like the Feminist Coalition and women leaders in civic protests (#EndSARS) have leveraged Twitter and other platforms to organise, fundraise, and sustain social movements, embodying public

leadership roles historically denied to women in mainstream Nigerian politics and society.

- Discussions about gender injustice – once whispered in private – are now amplified in public, inspiring community solidarity and advocacy against harmful practices.

At the same time, this digital destabilisation of the "Good Nigerian Woman" trope provokes backlash and online harassment. Nigeria grapples with severe technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including harassment, cyberstalking, and sexist abuse directed at women who speak publicly on issues of gender equality. Organisations such as ActionAid Nigeria have documented these abuses as obstacles to women's full participation in digital and public life. This resistance itself highlights how contested and transformative these digital counter-publics have become.

4.2 Transnational Influences and Cultural Hybridity

The expansion of digital connectivity has positioned Nigerian women within a broader transnational feminist discourse often described as a form of "global sisterhood." Through platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube, Nigerian women engage with global feminist hashtags including #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #BlackGirlMagic. These transnational narratives provide a language of resistance that transcends national boundaries and situates Nigerian gender struggles within a global framework of gender justice. However, empirical data indicate that digital access remains unevenly distributed along gender lines in Nigeria. According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (GSMA, 2024), only 33% of Nigerian adult women use mobile internet compared to 52% of men, reflecting a 38% gender gap in mobile internet usage. Since mobile devices constitute the primary gateway to internet access in Nigeria, this disparity significantly restricts women's participation in global digital feminist moveme nts. Further evidence from the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey reveals that internet usage among women aged 15–49 remains substantially lower than that of men, with significant rural–urban disparities (National Population Commission [NPC] & ICF, 2024).

Access to higher-order digital tools is also limited; only 13.4% of Nigerian women have ever used a computer compared to 21.8% of men (Dataphyte, 2023). These structural inequalities shape how Nigerian women engage with transnational feminist discourse.

Despite these constraints, Nigerian women actively participate in global feminist conversations. Online testimonies addressing sexual harassment in universities, religious institutions, and workplaces demonstrate localized adaptations of movements such as #MeToo. However, as Udupa and Turner (2021) caution, the global digital sphere is often dominated by Western liberal feminist paradigms emphasizing individual autonomy. Such frameworks do not always align seamlessly with Nigeria's socio-cultural realities, including strong religiosity and the enduring significance of extended family systems. Consequently, Nigerian women construct hybrid identities that selectively appropriate global feminist language while adapting it to local contexts.

This hybridity reflects strategic negotiation rather than passive adoption. Women integrate global narratives of empowerment while navigating culturally embedded expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and communal respectability. Importantly, digital participation also exposes women to gendered risks. Reports indicate that 58% of online abuse incidents in Nigeria disproportionately affect women (Technext, 2025). Technology-facilitated gender-based violence therefore complicates the emancipatory potential of digital engagement. Ultimately, transnational feminist engagement in Nigeria illustrates a dynamic process of cultural hybridity. Nigerian women participate in global sisterhood while recalibrating its meanings to reflect local religious, economic, and communal realities. This negotiation produces conte xtsensitive feminist praxis rather than wholesale ideological transplantation.

5. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR PROTECTION

As women increasingly occupy digital spaces to negotiate power and visibility, the role of the state transitions from a passive observer to a necessary arbiter of safety. However, in the Nigerian context, the relationship between the female digital citizen and the state remains fraught with tension.

While legislative instruments exist, they often lack the precision required to protect women from gender-specific digital violence, such as doxxing, non-consensual image sharing (NCII), and coordinated online mobbing. For digital power to be sustainable, it must be anchored in a legal framework that prioritizes the safety of the user over the comfort of the state.

5.1 The Cybercrimes Act and Women's Rights: A Tool for Protection or Suppression?

Nigeria's Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015 was initially heralded as a landmark piece of legislation for the digital economy. However, its implementation has revealed significant flaws, particularly regarding Section 24, which deals with "cyberstalking." Oluyemi (2022) argues that the Act's vague language has allowed it to be repurposed as a tool for political censorship rather than a mechanism for protecting vulnerable populations. When women use digital platforms to report sexual assault or criticize patriarchal institutions, they often find themselves threatened with "cyberstalking" charges by the accused. This judicial ambiguity creates a "chilling effect," where women self-censor to avoid legal entanglements. Furthermore, Ariyibi and Adetunji (2021) contend that the Nigerian legal system suffers from a "digital evidence gap," where law enforcement officers are often ill-equipped or unwilling to process digital gender-based violence (dGBV) as a serious crime. The systemic trivialization of online harassment as "just the internet" ignores the very real psychological and physical consequences for women. Consequently, the law often reinforces traditional power structures by failing to provide a clear, enforceable path to justice for female victims of digital abuse. Without specific amendments that define and criminalize NCII and digital grooming, the Act remains a blunt instrument that fails to address the nuances of gendered online experiences.

5.2 Policy Recommendations for Digital Equity: Access as a Feminist Prerogative

Beyond protection from harm, the negotiation of power requires material inclusion. The digital gender gap in Nigeria is not merely a technical issue but a socio-economic one.

According to The Alliance for Affordable Internet (2021), Nigeria's high data costs effectively act as a "participation tax," disproportionately excluding women who are more likely to occupy lower-income brackets due to systemic wage gaps. When the cost of a gigabyte represents a significant percentage of a woman's daily income, digital discourse becomes an elitist activity, silencing the voices of rural and low-income women. True digital equity requires what Emejulu and McGregor (2022) describe as "radical digital citizenship." This involves gender-responsive policy-making that goes beyond simply providing hardware. It requires the state to subsidize internet access for women-led small businesses and to integrate digital literacy into adult education frameworks. Policy must also address the "usage gap"- the phenomenon where women have access to the internet but lack the technical confidence to use it for advocacy or economic advancement due to internalized social norms. To achieve true power negotiation, Nigerian policy must treat high-speed, affordable internet not as a luxury for the urban elite, but as a fundamental human right essential for democratic participation. This conceptual framework illustrates the cyclical relationship between high data costs, digital exclusion, the usage gap, gender-responsive policy intervention, and radical digital citizenship in Nigeria. The model supports policy recommendations that treat affordable high-speed internet as a fundamental right essential for democratic participation and feminist power negotiation.

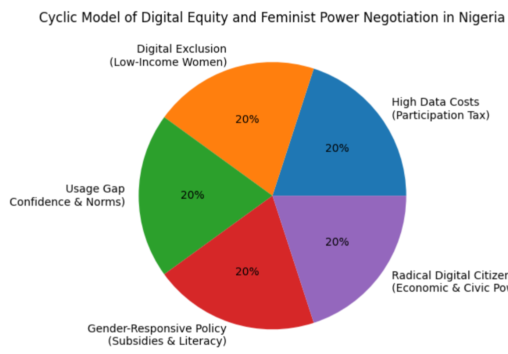

Figure 2. Cyclic Model of Digital Equity and Feminist Power Negotiation in Nigeria (Policy framework inspired by Alliance for Affordable Internet (2021) and Emejulu & McGregor (2022) on radical digital citizenship and gendered digital inequality)

CONCLUSION

The negotiation of power within Nigeria’s digital landscape represents a pivotal shift in the country’s gendered social contract. As this paper has demonstrated, the digital era serves as a "double-edged sword" for Nigerian women. On one hand, the emergence of a digital "third space" provides a critical escape from the physical and cultural restrictions of traditional patriarchal structures. By utilising globalised platforms, Nigerian women have successfully bypassed traditional gatekeepers – religious leaders, conservative family units, and restrictive social codes – to perform identities that prioritise autonomy, ambition, and bodily rights. This "politics of presence" has transformed the internet into a laboratory for a new kind of Nigerian womanhood that is both indigenous in its roots and global in its reach.

However, this newfound agency is frequently met with sophisticated resistance. The same platforms that offer liberation also host new frontiers of patriarchal surveillance and state-sanctioned violence. The weaponization of the Cybercrimes Act and the prevalence of digital gender-based violence (dGBV) serve as reminders that the digital realm is not a neutral utopia, but a contested territory where old hierarchies are constantly being reasserted. For the field of Women’s Studies, the Nigerian case study is instructive; it reveals that digital agency is a hollow victory if it is not supported by material inclusion. The "participation tax" created by high data costs and the "usage gap" born of internalised social norms ensure that digital power remains, for now, a privilege of the elite. Ultimately, true transformation requires more than just hardware; it demands a systemic dismantling of the structures that dictate who is allowed to speak and be heard. Achieving "radical digital citizenship" in Nigeria necessitates a multipronged approach: the indigenisation of global feminist ideals, the reform of vague legal frameworks, and the recognition of an affordable internet as a fundamental human right. Only when the digital space is protected from both state overreach and economic exclusion can it truly serve as a site for sustainable power negotiation. The future of Nigerian feminism will be decided not just by the hashtags used today, but by the policy reforms that ensure the digital voices of tomorrow are safe, loud, and economically viable.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, sustainable gender transformation in Nigeria's digital era requires a multi-level intervention framework that integrates legal reform, economic inclusion, digital literacy, and culturally grounded feminist praxis. First, the Nigerian government should reform the Cybercrimes Act (2015) to explicitly criminalise technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), including non-consensual image sharing, cyberstalking, and coordinated digital harassment. Clear legal definitions and gender-sensitive enforcement mechanisms are necessary to prevent the misuse of digital laws as tools of political suppression. In addition, bridging the digital gender divide must become a national development priority. Affordable high-speed internet should be treated as critical infrastructure, not a market luxury. Targeted subsidies for women-led enterprises, rural broadband expansion, and gender-responsive fintech frameworks would reduce structural exclusion and algorithmic bias. Also, digital literacy programs must move beyond technical training to include critical digital citizenship, online safety awareness, and confidence-building initiatives – particularly for rural and low-income women. Closing the "usage gap" is as important as closing the access gap.

Finally, transnational feminist engagement should be indigenised. Policymakers, scholars, and activists must promote culturally contextualised digital feminism that integrates local religious, communal, and socio-economic realities while resisting digital hegemony. It is only through coordinated legal, economic, technological, and cultural reforms can Nigeria transform digital spaces into sustainable platforms for equitable gender power negotiation.

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CHAPTER 4
REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE IN GLOBAL HEALTH: FEMINIST APPROACHES TO REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND HEALTH EQUITY

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INTRODUCTION

Punjab is Pakistan's most populous province, home to over 110 million people and accounting for roughly 53 percent of the national population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). It is also the administrative and economic centre of the country, generating the largest share of national GDP and housing the bulk of Pakistan's health infrastructure. Yet beneath these aggregate indicators lie profound reproductive health inequities that disproportionately burden women, particularly those from rural areas, low-income households, and socially marginalised communities. Punjab's maternal mortality ratio, though lower than in Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, remains deeply troubling: estimates place it at approximately 157 deaths per 100,000 live births, a figure that conceals wide rural-urban and inter-district disparities (National Institute of Population Studies [NIPS] & ICF, 2019). Women in southern Punjab districts such as Rahim Yar Khan, Muzaffargarh, and Dera Ghazi Khan face mortality risks two to three times higher than those in Lahore or Rawalpindi.

Global health discourse has traditionally framed reproductive rights as legal entitlements to access services such as contraception, safe delivery, and maternal care. While such a framework captures one dimension of the problem, it falls short of explaining why millions of women in Punjab remain unable to exercise these rights even where services nominally exist. The reproductive justice (RJ) framework, developed by women of colour activists in the United States in the 1990s and adapted for diverse Global South contexts, offers a more penetrating analytical lens. SisterSong, the national Reproductive Justice Collective, defines reproductive justice as the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities (SisterSong, n.d.). Applied to Punjab, this definition compels attention not only to the availability of contraceptive services but to the patriarchal household structures, feudal land relations, and institutional failures that determine whether a woman in rural Multan or peri-urban Faisalabad can actually act on any reproductive decision. Pakistan's legal framework provides a useful starting point. The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) guarantees the right to life and personal liberty under Article 9, and the right to dignity under Article 14.

The Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (2016) represents a landmark legislative step, while the Punjab Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Authority Act (2014) established a dedicated governance body for reproductive health. Yet legislation frequently remains unenforced. Abortion is governed by the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) Sections 338-338-F, which allow termination only to preserve the mother's life or to provide 'necessary treatment.' In practice, safe abortion services are scarce, stigmatised, and largely inaccessible to poor women, driving an estimated 2.2 million induced abortions annually across Pakistan, the majority conducted in unsafe conditions (Sathar et al., 2014).

A feminist critique reveals that these failures are not incidental but structural. Patriarchal norms embedded in family, community, and state institutions systematically subordinate women's reproductive choices to those of husbands, in-laws, and religious authorities. In Punjab's rural heartland, a woman's ability to seek family planning, attend antenatal care, or deliver in a health facility is frequently subject to male gatekeeping. The reproductive justice framework insists that we move beyond service expansion and interrogate the social, economic, and political conditions that constrain reproductive choice. This chapter adopts that approach, applying an intersectional feminist analysis to Punjab's reproductive health landscape to identify the structural determinants of reproductive injustice and propose policy directions grounded in equity, community agency, and rights.

The chapter is organised as follows. Section 1 situates reproductive justice as a feminist framework and establishes its relevance to Punjab's socio-political context. Section 2 analyses intersectional barriers to reproductive health across the province. Section 3 proposes strategies for advancing reproductive justice through feminist health governance and civil society action in Punjab. Section 4 presents case studies drawn from the province's reproductive health landscape. The conclusion synthesises key lessons and offers recommendations for policy and practice.

1. REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AS A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK IN THE PUNJAB CONTEXT

Feminist scholars argue that reproductive justice (RJ) offers a more transformative paradigm than conventional reproductive rights approaches. Reproductive rights frameworks, as embodied in Pakistan's Population Welfare Programme and international instruments such as the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, 1994), tend to focus on legal permissions and service delivery targets: increasing contraceptive prevalence rates, reducing maternal mortality, and expanding access to family planning clinics. Valuable as these goals are, they operate within a paradigm that treats reproductive choices as individual decisions awaiting legal enablement, rather than as social outcomes shaped by deeply unequal power structures.

Reproductive justice, by contrast, situates reproductive rights within social justice. It holds that true reproductive autonomy is impossible without addressing systemic inequality, poverty, gender-based violence, and discriminatory social norms (Ross & Solinger, 2017). For Punjab, this means recognising that a contraceptive prevalence rate of approximately 38 percent, among the lowest relative to the province's demographic profile, is not merely a supply-side problem to be solved by distributing more contraceptives (NIPS & ICF, 2019). It reflects a patriarchal social order in which women's reproductive decisions are subject to spousal authority, religious sanction, and community surveillance. Table 1 illustrates the distinction between the two frameworks as it applies to Punjab's context.

The feminist framework also interrogates how historical and ongoing power relations shape reproductive experiences in Punjab. Colonial policies introduced during British rule restructured agrarian economies and family systems in Punjab, strengthening patriarchal control over women's labour, sexuality, and reproduction as part of maintaining a docile peasant workforce (Jalal, 1991). Post-independence governments in Pakistan have continued to instrumentalise women's bodies: family planning programmes of the 1960s and 1970s were driven by demographic anxieties rather than women's autonomy, often deploying coercive incentives for sterilisation and IUD insertion without adequate informed consent.

These histories of reproductive coercion shape contemporary community distrust of state health services, particularly among poor, rural, and lower-caste communities. Crucially, RJ is grounded in intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to describe how race, gender, class, and other identities intersect to produce unique forms of disadvantage. Applied to Punjab, intersectionality requires attention to how the biraderi system of hierarchical kinship and caste-like social stratification, class, gender, geographic location, and disability interact to produce radically different reproductive experiences. An upper-class woman in Lahore's Defence Housing Authority navigating an unwanted pregnancy inhabits an entirely different reproductive landscape from a landless labourer woman in rural Bahawalpur confronting the same situation without income, transport, spousal support, or access to a trained health provider. Reproductive justice compels policy-makers to design for the latter, not the former.

Reproductive justice frameworks also align closely with critiques of neoliberal health governance, which are highly relevant to Pakistan's context. Since the 1980s, International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programmes and World Bank conditionalities have repeatedly pressured Pakistan to reduce public expenditure, including on health. Pakistan's public health spending, at approximately 1.2 percent of GDP, remains among the lowest in South Asia (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). In Punjab, this translates into chronically understaffed Basic Health Units (BHUs), shortages of Lady Health Workers (LHWs) in remote areas, and a health system that is de facto privatised for the poor, meaning that out-of-pocket payments determine access to reproductive care. Feminist political economy perspectives, central to RJ, illuminate how these macroeconomic structures produce reproductive harm at the community level.

Finally, RJ explicitly includes parenting rights, a dimension often overlooked in Pakistan's reproductive health discourse. The right to raise children in safe, well-resourced environments is urgently relevant in a province where 36 percent of children under five are stunted (NIPS & ICF, 2019), reflecting the failure of the state to create conditions in which parents can fulfil their caregiving responsibilities.

Child marriages, which remain widespread in southern Punjab despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), compound reproductive injustice by denying girls their right not to bear children before they are ready, with severe consequences for their physical health, educational attainment, and lifelong autonomy.

Table 1. Reproductive Rights vs. Reproductive Justice: Applications to Punjab, Pakistan

Aspect	Reproductive Rights Approach	Reproductive Justice Approach
Focus	Legal access to contraception, maternal care, and family planning services in Punjab	Social, economic, and political conditions enabling genuine reproductive choice in Punjab households and communities
Scope	Contraceptive prevalence rate, skilled birth attendance, maternal mortality ratio	Poverty, spousal authority, biraderi norms, feudal land relations, and their reproductive consequences
Principles	Bodily autonomy as a legal right guaranteed by Pakistan's Constitution and international commitments	Bodily autonomy as a human right requiring transformation of patriarchal household and state structures
Advocacy Roots	National Population Welfare Programme; ICPD Programme of Action; WHO maternal health targets	Aurat Foundation; Shirkat Gah; Lady Health Workers' movement; women's grassroots activism across Punjab
Example Issues	Increasing contraceptive prevalence; reducing MMR; training traditional birth attendants (TBAs)	Eliminating child marriage; ending spousal veto on family planning; reforming abortion law; addressing gender-based violence
Key Concern	Service delivery and decriminalisation of specific reproductive acts	Dismantling patriarchal household authority, economic dependency, and feudal power structures that deny reproductive autonomy

In practice, this distinction plays out visibly in Punjab's rural districts. A reproductive rights approach celebrates the expansion of the LHW programme, now comprising over 70,000 community-based health workers in Punjab, as a supply-side success. A reproductive justice approach asks why so many LHWs themselves face harassment, non-payment of salaries, and pressure from male community leaders who resist their presence, and concludes that expanding the programme without addressing these structural conditions remains insufficient. Reproductive justice insists that the conditions under which women's reproductive healthcare is delivered must themselves be just.

2. INTERSECTIONAL BARRIERS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN PUNJAB

A central contribution of the reproductive justice framework is its insistence on intersectionality: the understanding that reproductive experiences are shaped not by any single factor but by the interaction of multiple social identities and structural forces. In Punjab, the reproductive health outcomes of any given woman are determined by a complex configuration of gender, class, geographic location, educational attainment, biraderi affiliation, marital status, and disability. The following analysis examines the key intersectional barriers operating across the province.

2.1 Patriarchy, Spousal Authority, and Household Power

The most pervasive barrier to reproductive autonomy in Punjab is the patriarchal household structure in which husbands and in-laws exercise decisive authority over women's reproductive decisions. Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) data consistently show that a large majority of currently married women in Punjab cite their husband's opposition as the primary reason for non-use of contraception (NIPS & ICF, 2019). In rural southern Punjab, surveys document that women routinely require their husbands' permission to visit a health facility, a form of male gatekeeping that delays or prevents antenatal care, institutional delivery, and postnatal visits. This is not merely a cultural aberration but a systemic feature of a social order in which women's mobility, economic resources, and social standing are structurally subordinated to male authority.

Religious and clerical influence reinforces patriarchal resistance to reproductive health services in many communities across Punjab. Some religious scholars have historically opposed family planning as un-Islamic, creating community environments hostile to contraceptive use and LHW visits. While the Council of Islamic Ideology has issued fatwas permitting family planning under specific conditions, these rulings have not uniformly permeated rural communities. A feminist reproductive justice analysis does not dismiss religious dimensions but interrogates how patriarchal authority is reproduced through religious institutions, and how alternative Islamic jurisprudential interpretations that affirm women's dignity and bodily autonomy can be elevated in public discourse.

2.2 Socio-Economic Inequality and Out-of-Pocket Health Costs

Economic inequality is a fundamental determinant of reproductive health in Punjab. With approximately 26 percent of Punjab's rural population living below the poverty line (Planning & Development Board Punjab, 2022), the cost of reproductive healthcare is prohibitive for millions of women. Despite the existence of government health facilities, out-of-pocket payments for transport, medicines, informal provider fees, and facility charges effectively exclude the poorest women from institutional care. Deliveries in private facilities, which have become the norm for middle-class families in cities like Lahore, Faisalabad, and Gujranwala, cost between PKR 20,000 and 100,000 or more, sums entirely beyond the reach of rural daily wage workers.

The Sehat Sahulat Programme, Punjab's health insurance scheme, has extended coverage to a growing number of households, yet its benefit package does not comprehensively cover reproductive health services, and claims processes remain complex for low-literacy beneficiaries. Women's economic dependency within households further compounds this problem: even where a woman recognises the need for care, she may lack autonomous control over household funds to access it. Feminist political economists argue that reproductive health is inseparable from women's economic empowerment, and that programmes targeting maternal health without addressing women's income and asset ownership are structurally inadequate (Grown et al., 2005).

2.3 Geographic Disparities: Rural, Peri-Urban, and Remote Communities

Punjab's reproductive health landscape is profoundly shaped by geography. The province's southern districts, including Rahim Yar Khan, Rajanpur, Muzaffargarh, and Bahawalpur, are characterised by sparse health infrastructure, poor road connectivity, high rates of child marriage, and extremely limited access to skilled birth attendants. By contrast, central Punjab districts surrounding Lahore and Faisalabad enjoy comparatively robust health facility networks and higher rates of institutional delivery. The PDHS 2017-18 data reveal that skilled birth attendance in rural Punjab (approximately 73 percent) lags significantly behind urban Punjab (approximately 88 percent), and that this gap widens further when data are disaggregated by wealth quintile and district (NIPS & ICF, 2019).

Peri-urban communities present a distinct and often overlooked reproductive health challenge. As Punjab's cities expand rapidly, growing settlement areas on the periphery of Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, and Gujranwala house large populations of internal migrants who fall between rural and urban health service categories. Women in these communities frequently lack National Identity Cards (NICs), which are required to access government health facilities and Sehat Sahulat benefits, and are excluded from LHW coverage zones that have not been updated to reflect demographic changes. The reproductive health needs of peri-urban migrant women represent a critical governance gap in Punjab's health system.

2.4 Biraderi, Caste, and Social Stratification

Punjab's biraderi system, a hierarchical kinship and caste-like structure, intersects with gender and class to shape reproductive health outcomes in ways that mainstream health policy rarely acknowledges. Women from marginalised biraderis, including Christian minorities concentrated in central Punjab and lower-status Muslim communities such as the Kami, Mochi, and Meghwar groups in southern Punjab, face compounded disadvantage.

They experience discrimination from health providers, exclusion from community health initiatives dominated by higher-status groups, and fewer social resources to navigate health systems. Studies on health-seeking behaviour in rural Punjab document that provider discrimination along caste and class lines leads women from marginalised communities to delay or avoid facility visits, contributing to worse maternal and neonatal outcomes (Mumtaz & Salway, 2007).

Religious minority women, comprising Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities in Punjab, face additional layers of marginalisation. Christian women employed as domestic workers in urban Punjab, a significant labour force in cities like Lahore, often lack employer-provided health benefits, live in informal settlements, and face social stigma that discourages engagement with government health facilities. Their reproductive health needs remain structurally invisible in provincial data collection and policy design, representing a clear failure of intersectional governance.

2.5 Child Marriage and Adolescent Reproductive Health

Child marriage represents one of the most acute reproductive justice violations in Punjab. Despite legal prohibitions under the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), Punjab has yet to enact updated provincial legislation raising the minimum marriage age to 18 for girls.

Estimates suggest that approximately 21 percent of women aged 20-24 in Punjab were married before the age of 18 (NIPS & ICF, 2019), with rates considerably higher in southern Punjab's rural districts. Child brides face early and repeated pregnancies before their bodies and life circumstances are prepared, with devastating consequences: adolescent girls aged 15-19 face significantly higher risks of obstructed labour, obstetric fistula, and maternal death than adult women.

Adolescent reproductive health more broadly is poorly served in Punjab. Comprehensive sexuality education is absent from public school curricula, reflecting a political environment in which discussion of reproductive health and rights in educational settings remains taboo.

Young women who seek family planning services from government facilities frequently report being turned away on the grounds that they are unmarried, exposing the deep incoherence between a rights-based commitment to universal access and the moralistic gatekeeping of front-line providers. A reproductive justice framework demands that adolescent girls be recognised as reproductive subjects with full rights to information, services, and protection from coercive marriage and pregnancy.

2.6 Legal Restrictions and Unsafe Abortion

Pakistan's restrictive abortion law constitutes one of the most significant structural barriers to reproductive justice in Punjab. Sections 338 to 338-F of the Pakistan Penal Code permit abortion only to save the mother's life or provide 'necessary treatment,' a formulation so narrow and ambiguous that it effectively denies safe abortion to the vast majority of women seeking it. An estimated 2.2 million induced abortions take place annually in Pakistan, the majority conducted by untrained providers in unsafe conditions, leading to serious complications and preventable deaths (Sathar et al., 2014). In Punjab alone, an estimated 660,000 abortions occur each year, of which a substantial proportion result in post-abortion complications requiring hospitalisation (Population Council Pakistan, 2012).

The legal framework criminalises providers as well as women, driving abortion services underground and making it impossible to regulate quality or ensure informed consent. Women seeking abortion in Punjab must navigate a clandestine market of informal providers, pharmacists dispensing misoprostol without guidance, and private clinics operating outside regulatory frameworks. Poor women are most exposed to the risks of this unregulated landscape, while wealthier women can access discreet private providers with greater safety. This class dimension of unsafe abortion is a textbook example of structural violence: a legal and policy arrangement that systematically harms the poorest and most marginalised women while leaving those with resources relatively protected.

2.7 Disability and Reproductive Exclusion

Women with disabilities in Punjab face a largely invisible form of reproductive injustice.

Government reproductive health facilities are overwhelmingly inaccessible to women with physical disabilities: buildings lack ramps, examination tables cannot accommodate wheelchair users, and health workers receive no training in communicating with deaf or hard-of-hearing women. Women with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and non-consensual sterilisation, practices that have been documented in institutional settings in Pakistan but remain largely unaddressed by law or policy. The Punjab Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance (1981) offers limited employment-focused protections, and there is no specific provincial legislation addressing the reproductive health rights of women with disabilities. Reproductive justice demands that disability be centred in health policy design, not treated as an afterthought.

Table 2. Intersectional Barriers to Reproductive Health in Punjab, Pakistan

Intersecting Factors	Barrier in Punjab Context	Reproductive Health Impact
Poverty + Gender	Out-of-pocket costs for delivery, contraception, and transport in rural southern Punjab	High rates of home delivery by TBAs; delayed care-seeking; high unintended pregnancy rates
Rural Geography + Low Education	Sparse health facilities in Rahim Yar Khan, Rajanpur, and Muzaffargarh; low female literacy	Low skilled birth attendance (~73% rural vs ~88% urban); reliance on TBAs; poor family planning knowledge
Patriarchy + Spousal Authority	Husband/in-law veto on contraceptive use and facility visits across rural Punjab	Contraceptive prevalence rate (~38%); delayed antenatal care; high unmet need for family planning
Biraderi/Caste + Gender	Provider discrimination against lower-caste and Christian women in health facilities	Avoidance of facility care; higher risk of maternal complications; invisibility in health data

Intersecting Factors	Barrier in Punjab Context	Reproductive Health Impact
Child Marriage + Adolescence	~21% of women aged 20-24 in Punjab married before 18; no sex education in schools	Adolescent pregnancies; obstetric fistula; higher maternal and neonatal mortality among girls under 18
Legal Restrictions + Class	Criminalised abortion under PPC Sections 338-338-F; unsafe informal providers for poor women	~660,000 unsafe abortions annually in Punjab; preventable maternal deaths; post-abortion complications
Peri-Urban Migration + Documentation	Lack of NIC among migrant women in informal settlements around Lahore, Faisalabad, and Multan	Exclusion from Sehat Sahulat and LHW services; invisibility in health statistics
Disability + Gender	Inaccessible health facilities; no provider training on disability-inclusive reproductive care	Exclusion from reproductive services; vulnerability to non-consensual sterilisation
Climate + Rural Poverty	Flood-related displacement in southern Punjab (2022 floods severely affected 9 districts)	Disruption of antenatal care; increased GBV in displacement camps; loss of contraceptive supplies

The 2022 super-floods, which inundated approximately one-third of Pakistan and displaced over 7 million people in Punjab's southern districts, provide a stark illustration of the compound vulnerability captured in Table 2. Flood-affected women in displacement camps experienced disruption of antenatal care, loss of contraceptive supplies, and sharply elevated rates of gender-based violence, while the state's humanitarian response largely failed to integrate reproductive health services into emergency relief (UNFPA Pakistan, 2022). This crisis exposed how pre-existing reproductive injustices rooted in poverty, geographic marginality, and institutional neglect are dramatically intensified under environmental disaster conditions.

Feminist reproductive justice analysis insists that climate adaptation planning in Punjab must centre the reproductive health needs of women in the most flood-vulnerable communities of the province's south.

3. ADVANCING REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE THROUGH FEMINIST HEALTH GOVERNANCE IN PUNJAB

Moving from diagnosis to action requires identifying institutional entry points and advocacy strategies capable of transforming Punjab's reproductive health governance. This section proposes a feminist reproductive justice approach to health policy in Punjab, drawing on evidence from existing programmes, civil society campaigns, and comparative experience within Pakistan.

3.1 Strengthening the Lady Health Workers Programme as a Reproductive Justice Intervention

Punjab's Lady Health Workers (LHW) programme, established nationally in 1994, represents one of the most significant community-based health interventions in the province's history. With over 70,000 LHWs operating in rural and peri-urban Punjab, the programme provides doorstep family planning counselling, contraceptive distribution, antenatal care registration, and referrals. Evaluated through a reproductive rights lens, the programme is a supply-side achievement. Evaluated through a reproductive justice lens, however, its limitations become apparent. LHWs are overwhelmingly women from the communities they serve, yet they face chronic salary delays, inadequate supervision, insufficient drug supplies, and exposure to harassment from community members hostile to family planning.

A reproductive justice approach to the LHW programme would prioritise the rights and working conditions of LHWs themselves, recognising that the reproductive labour of community health workers cannot be justly exploited to patch gaps left by an underfunded health system. It would also extend the programme's geographic reach to peri-urban migrant communities, update catchment area mapping to reflect urbanisation, and equip LHWs with training on gender-based violence identification and referral, adolescent reproductive health counselling, and disability-inclusive communication.

The Punjab Health Department should implement regular salary payment, provide protective protocols against community harassment, and create career progression pathways for LHWs, treating them as skilled professionals rather than low-cost female labour.

3.2 Legal Reform: Child Marriage and Abortion Law

Reproductive justice in Punjab demands legal reform in two areas where current frameworks directly violate women's bodily autonomy. First, Punjab must enact updated child marriage legislation raising the minimum marriage age for girls to 18, in alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which Pakistan is a signatory. The Punjab government's repeated deferral of this reform in the face of pressure from religious political parties reflects the power of patriarchal coalitions over women's rights, and must be confronted through sustained civil society advocacy and feminist political organising within the province.

Second, abortion law reform is essential. The current framework under Sections 338-338-F of the PPC effectively criminalises most abortions and drives an enormous volume of unsafe procedures that kill and maim thousands of women in Punjab annually. In the immediate term, official clinical guidelines clarifying permissible grounds for abortion, training of health providers in safe abortion and post-abortion care, and decriminalisation of post-abortion treatment would save lives without requiring legislative change. In the medium term, feminist legal advocates and civil society organisations should build the political case for legislative amendment, drawing on Pakistan's own constitutional guarantees of the right to life and the right to health under Articles 9 and 14.

3.3 Community-Led Approaches and Feminist Civil Society in Punjab

Among the most important reproductive justice actors in Punjab are feminist civil society organisations that have worked for decades to advance women's rights within a deeply conservative political environment.

The Aurat Foundation, headquartered in Lahore, has documented gender-based violence, monitored legislation, and built grassroots women's groups across Punjab's districts. Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre has produced influential research and advocacy on women's health and sexual and reproductive rights. The White Ribbon Alliance Pakistan has mobilised communities around safe motherhood. These organisations embody the reproductive justice principle of centring marginalised communities in the design and advocacy of health interventions, and they deserve sustained funding from both the provincial government and international donors.

Community-based approaches are particularly critical in reaching women excluded by formal health systems. In several districts of southern Punjab, community organisations have trained local women as para-social workers bridging gaps between formal LHW coverage and household-level needs. Women's savings and credit groups operating within the framework of the Punjab Rural Support Programme and the National Rural Support Programme have demonstrated that women's economic empowerment and reproductive health outcomes are mutually reinforcing: women with independent income are significantly more likely to seek antenatal care, deliver in facilities, and use contraception (Salaam et al., 2018). These community economic programmes should be formally integrated with reproductive health service delivery across Punjab.

3.4 Gender-Responsive Health Financing and Disaggregated Data

A feminist reproductive justice approach to Punjab's health system requires two systemic reforms: gender-responsive budgeting and intersectionally disaggregated data collection. Punjab's health budget allocations rarely specify what proportion reaches reproductive health services, and there is no systematic gender audit of how health expenditures affect women of different classes, biraderis, and geographic locations. The Punjab Finance Department and the PRMNCH Authority should establish gender-responsive budgeting frameworks that track reproductive health spending and evaluate distributional equity across the province's 36 districts.

Equally critical is the reform of health information systems. Punjab's District Health Information System (DHIS) collects aggregate data on maternal health indicators but does not routinely disaggregate by biraderi, disability, migration status, or adolescent age group. This invisibility in data translates directly into invisibility in policy. A reproductive justice-informed data system would collect and publish disaggregated reproductive health indicators, making it possible to identify and respond to the compounded disadvantages faced by the most marginalised women across the province. International development partners, including UNFPA, WHO, and USAID, which support Punjab's health data systems, should condition this support on the adoption of intersectionally disaggregated data standards.

3.5 Principles for Feminist Reproductive Justice Governance in Punjab

Table 3. Principles and Actions for Feminist Reproductive Justice Governance in Punjab

Principle	Specific Actions for Punjab
Intersectionality	Disaggregate reproductive health data by district, wealth quintile, biraderi, disability, and migration status in Punjab's DHIS; design programmes targeting compound disadvantage in southern Punjab districts
Community Participation	Include LHW representatives, women's group leaders, and minority community members in PRMNCH Authority advisory bodies; conduct district-level reproductive health needs assessments led by affected communities
Legal Reform	Enact Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Act raising minimum age to 18; issue clinical guidelines clarifying legal grounds for abortion; decriminalise post-abortion care across all public facilities
Economic Justice	Regularise and increase LHW salaries; expand Sehat Sahulat to cover full reproductive health services; integrate reproductive health with women's economic empowerment programmes under PRSP and NRSP
Local Knowledge and Decoloniality	Support indigenous midwifery training combining skilled birth attendance with local birthing knowledge; fund Urdu-

Principle	Specific Actions for Punjab
	and Punjabi-language reproductive health education materials developed by and for local communities
Accountability	Establish a Gender and Reproductive Health Ombudsperson for Punjab; require annual gender-responsive reproductive health budget reporting; monitor CEDAW compliance at provincial level through independent civil society review
Emergency Preparedness	Integrate reproductive health kits (contraceptives, clean delivery kits, GBV referral protocols) into Punjab's flood and disaster response plans, prioritising the nine most flood-vulnerable southern districts

The principles in Table 3 are grounded in Pakistan's existing international commitments, including CEDAW, the CRC, the ICPD Programme of Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Feminist reproductive justice governance does not require the wholesale importation of external frameworks but rather the rigorous domestic implementation of rights to which the Government of Pakistan has already committed, applied through an intersectional lens that centres the needs of Punjab's most marginalised women.

4. CASE STUDIES FROM PUNJAB'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH LANDSCAPE

4.1 The Lady Health Workers' Strikes: Reproductive Labour and Workers' Rights

In 2012 and again in 2017, Punjab's Lady Health Workers staged sustained strikes against chronic salary non-payment, arbitrary contract terminations, and denial of permanent employment status. The strikes, which at their peak involved tens of thousands of LHWs across the province, represent one of the most significant labour actions by women health workers in Pakistan's history. They illuminate the central contradiction of Punjab's reproductive health system: a programme that depends on women's community presence and relational labour to deliver services, yet refuses to recognise that labour with fair wages, job security, or occupational protections.

From a reproductive justice perspective, the LHW strikes are not merely a labour dispute but a reproductive justice struggle. The striking women demanded recognition of the conditions under which reproductive healthcare is delivered, insisting that feminised community health work be valued and protected. Their movement-built alliances with women's rights organisations, trade unions, and political parties, eventually securing a Supreme Court of Pakistan ruling ordering regularisation of LHW employment. The case demonstrates that reproductive justice advocacy in Punjab can succeed through coalition-building that connects reproductive health to broader struggles for economic justice and workers' rights.

4.2 Obstetric Fistula in Southern Punjab: The Geography of Reproductive Harm

Obstetric fistula, a devastating injury caused by prolonged obstructed labour without timely surgical intervention, is among the most visible manifestations of reproductive injustice in Punjab. While national prevalence data are limited, estimates suggest tens of thousands of women in Pakistan are living with untreated fistula, with high concentrations in southern Punjab's rural districts (UNFPA Pakistan, 2020). The condition is almost entirely preventable through skilled attendance at delivery and emergency obstetric care, yet it persists precisely in the communities where these services are most absent: remote areas among the poorest women, in districts where female mobility is most constrained by patriarchal norms.

Fistula repair campaigns run by Hameed Latif Hospital in Lahore and supported by UNFPA Pakistan have provided reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation to thousands of women across the province, and deserve significant expansion. However, a reproductive justice analysis insists that repair must be accompanied by prevention: investing in obstetric infrastructure in southern Punjab's district and tehsil hospitals, training and retaining skilled birth attendants in remote communities, providing transport subsidies for women in labour, and addressing the spousal permission requirement that delays emergency referral.

The persistence of obstetric fistula in Punjab in the twenty-first century is not a medical failure but a political one, the result of sustained under-investment in the reproductive health of the province's poorest women.

4.3 Feminist Civil Society and the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (2016)

The Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (PPWVA, 2016) was a landmark legislative achievement driven substantially by feminist civil society advocacy, particularly by the Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, and allied organisations. The Act established a legal framework for protection orders, shelter homes, and prosecution of domestic, psychological, and economic violence against women, including forms of violence that directly impinge on reproductive autonomy such as forced marriage, confinement, and denial of access to healthcare. Its passage provoked fierce opposition from religious and conservative political groups who framed it as a threat to family structure, and the Council of Islamic Ideology issued a critical review of several provisions.

The struggle over the PPWVA illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of legislative reproductive justice advocacy in Punjab's political environment. The Act was passed but its implementation has been partial: shelter homes (Darul Amans) are overcrowded and underfunded, the Violence Against Women Centres (VAWCs) established in a number of districts have faced resistance from local administrators, and women's awareness of the Act's provisions remains low outside urban areas. Feminist organisations continue to monitor implementation, document gaps, and press for enforcement of protections that would materially advance the reproductive autonomy of women experiencing domestic violence across Punjab.

4.4 Post-Abortion Care in Punjab's Public Hospitals

Despite the legal ambiguity surrounding abortion in Pakistan, Punjab's public hospitals routinely provide post-abortion care (PAC) to women presenting with incomplete or unsafe abortions.

Research by the Population Council Pakistan has documented that PAC is one of the most commonly delivered reproductive health services in district hospitals across Punjab, reflecting the enormous volume of women experiencing abortion complications (Sathar et al., 2014). Yet the provision of PAC occurs in a legal and ethical grey zone in which health providers fear prosecution, women are sometimes subjected to moral interrogation by staff, and counselling on contraception following PAC, a critical preventive intervention, is delivered inconsistently.

A reproductive justice approach to PAC in Punjab's hospitals would begin with the recognition that providing life-saving care to women experiencing abortion complications is an unconditional medical obligation. It would standardise PAC protocols across district hospitals and Basic Health Units, integrate PAC with comprehensive family planning counselling, and train providers in non-judgmental care. International organisations including UNFPA, Ipas, and the Population Council have supported PAC quality improvement initiatives in Punjab, and these should be scaled with government funding rather than remaining dependent on project-based donor support. The mainstreaming of high-quality PAC within Punjab's public health system would represent a concrete, achievable reproductive justice gains within current legal constraints.

CONCLUSION

Reproductive justice in Punjab, Pakistan, demands nothing less than a fundamental transformation of the social, legal, economic, and institutional structures that determine whether a woman can exercise genuine autonomy over her reproductive life. This chapter has argued that mainstream reproductive health approaches focused on contraceptive prevalence rates, maternal mortality ratios, and skilled birth attendance targets are necessary but profoundly insufficient. They cannot, by themselves, address the patriarchal household structures that give husbands veto power over contraceptive decisions, the feudal land relations that keep women in economic dependency, the biraderi hierarchies that expose lower-caste and minority women to provider discrimination, or the legal frameworks that criminalise abortion and drive preventable maternal deaths.

Applying an intersectional feminist lens reveals that reproductive injustice in Punjab is not a uniform experience but a deeply stratified one. The reproductive life of a middle-class, educated woman in Lahore differs radically from that of a landless labourer woman in rural Rajanpur or a Christian domestic worker in a Lahore settlement. Policy must be designed for these differences rather than around an implicit norm of the married, urban, middle-class woman. This requires disaggregated data, community-led design, and a political commitment to centring the most marginalised.

The strategies proposed in this chapter, including strengthening and fairly compensating LHWs, reforming child marriage and abortion law, investing in southern Punjab's obstetric infrastructure, building feminist civil society capacity, adopting gender-responsive budgeting, and integrating reproductive health into climate disaster response, are grounded in Pakistan's existing international commitments and achievable within Punjab's institutional landscape. None requires the wholesale reinvention of the health system; all require political will, sustained feminist advocacy, and a willingness to confront the patriarchal coalitions that have historically obstructed women's reproductive rights in the province.

The case studies examined here, including the LHW strikes, the persistence of obstetric fistula in southern Punjab, the PPWVA advocacy campaign, and the scale of unsafe abortion and PAC in public hospitals, demonstrate that reproductive justice struggles in Punjab are alive, consequential, and connected to broader movements for economic justice, workers' rights, and democratic governance. Feminist reproductive justice is not an imported framework but a living practice, pursued daily by LHWs, Aurat Foundation activists, women's rights lawyers, community midwives, and millions of ordinary women navigating an unjust system with dignity and determination. The role of research, policy, and international support is to amplify these struggles, remove structural obstacles, and build the institutional conditions in which every woman in Punjab can exercise her reproductive rights not merely on paper, but in everyday reality.

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Key Terms

Reproductive Justice (RJ): An intersectional framework asserting that all people have the right to have children, not have children, and to parent in safe, healthy environments. In the Punjab context, RJ extends beyond contraceptive access to encompass freedom from patriarchal household control, child marriage, unsafe abortion, and economic dependency.

Lady Health Workers (LHWs): A cadre of over 70,000 community-based health workers in Punjab who provide family planning counselling, contraceptive distribution, antenatal care registration, and referrals at the household level. Their programme is central to Punjab's reproductive health system but is undermined by chronic salary non-payment and inadequate institutional support.

Biraderi System: A hierarchical kinship and caste-like social structure in Punjab that organises social relations, marriage patterns, and community standing. The biraderi system intersects with gender and class to produce compounded disadvantage for women from lower-status groups in accessing reproductive health services.

Obstetric Fistula: A debilitating injury caused by prolonged obstructed labour without timely surgical intervention, leaving a woman with an uncontrolled passage between the bladder or rectum and the vagina. Its persistence in rural southern Punjab reflects sustained under-investment in obstetric care for the province's poorest women.

Post-Abortion Care (PAC): Medical treatment for women experiencing complications of induced or spontaneous abortion, including incomplete abortion, infection, and haemorrhage. PAC is among the most frequently provided reproductive health services in Punjab's public hospitals, reflecting the volume of unsafe abortions resulting from Pakistan's restrictive abortion law.

Intersectionality: A theoretical framework developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) describing how multiple social categories such as gender, class, caste, geography, and disability interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Applied to Punjab, intersectionality reveals how reproductive injustice is not uniform but deeply stratified across communities.

Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (PPWVA) 2016: A landmark provincial law providing legal remedies for domestic, psychological, and economic violence against women in Punjab. Its reproductive justice significance lies in its recognition of forms of violence, including forced marriage and denial of healthcare access, that directly impinge on reproductive autonomy.

Spousal Authority / Male Gatekeeping: The patriarchal social norm, common across rural Punjab, by which a woman must obtain her husband's or in-laws' permission before accessing healthcare, using contraception, or leaving the home. Male gatekeeping is one of the primary barriers to contraceptive uptake and institutional delivery in the province.

Bodily Autonomy: The right of individuals to make decisions about their own bodies without coercion or external interference. In Punjab's context, genuine bodily autonomy requires not merely legal rights but freedom from economic dependency, spousal control, and institutional discrimination.

Structural Violence: A concept describing how social and economic structures, including poverty, legal discrimination, and institutional neglect, systematically harm individuals by preventing them from meeting basic needs. In Punjab, structural violence manifests in preventable maternal deaths, unsafe abortions, and obstetric injuries that disproportionately affect the poorest women.

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