

Reframing Food Insecurity in the Digital Era: Marginalized Women, Cultural Identity, and Public Policy Dynamics

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Abstract

Food insecurity remains one of the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century, disproportionately affecting women and marginalized communities. In recent years, digital technologies such as biometric identification, electronic vouchers, and online entitlement systems have been promoted as solutions to inefficiency and corruption in welfare distribution. However, these initiatives often reproduce existing inequalities, as women's access to digital platforms is mediated by gendered, cultural, and socio-economic constraints. While existing scholarship has examined food insecurity, the digital divide, and intersectionality, these fields of study remain largely disconnected, leaving a gap in understanding how digital infrastructures themselves govern hunger. This paper addresses that gap by introducing the concept of the Digital Hunger Regime, a theoretical framework that explains how technological systems, bureaucratic rationalities, and cultural hierarchies interact to determine access to food. The study employs a conceptual methodology grounded in library research, critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, and decolonial critique, synthesizing policy documents, NGO reports, and scholarly literature to build a theoretical argument. The analysis demonstrates that digitalization in welfare is not a neutral tool of modernization, but a governance regime that often intensifies food insecurity while simultaneously creating limited spaces for resistance and alternative forms of solidarity. By reframing hunger in the digital era as a question of power, identity, and cultural justice, the paper contributes to debates in the humanities and social sciences, highlighting the hidden politics of digital welfare and offering a new lens for both academic inquiry and policy innovation.

Keywords: Food Insecurity, Digital Inequality, Cultural Identity, Decolonization, Public Policy

Membingkai Ulang Kerentanan Pangan di Era Digital: Perempuan Terpinggirkan, Identitas Budaya, dan Dinamika Kebijakan Publik

Abstrak

Ketahanan pangan tetap menjadi salah satu tantangan paling mendesak di abad ke-21, yang secara tidak proporsional berdampak pada perempuan dan komunitas yang terpinggirkan. Dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, teknologi digital seperti identifikasi biometrik, voucher elektronik, dan sistem hak berbasis daring dipromosikan sebagai solusi untuk mengatasi inefisiensi dan korupsi dalam distribusi kesejahteraan. Namun, inisiatif-inisiatif ini sering kali mereproduksi ketidaksetaraan yang sudah ada, karena akses perempuan terhadap platform digital dimediasi oleh kendala gender, budaya, dan sosial-ekonomi. Sementara kajian yang ada telah meneliti ketahanan pangan, kesenjangan digital, dan interseksionalitas, bidang-bidang kajian tersebut sebagian besar masih terpisah, sehingga meninggalkan celah dalam memahami bagaimana infrastruktur digital itu sendiri mengatur persoalan kelaparan. Artikel ini menjawab celah tersebut dengan memperkenalkan konsep Digital Hunger Regime, sebuah kerangka teoretis yang menjelaskan bagaimana sistem teknologi, rasionalitas birokrasi, dan hierarki budaya berinteraksi dalam menentukan akses terhadap pangan. Studi ini menggunakan metodologi konseptual yang didasarkan pada penelitian kepustakaan, analisis wacana kritis, teori feminis, dan kritik dekolonial, dengan mensintesis dokumen kebijakan, laporan LSM, dan literatur akademik untuk membangun sebuah argumen teoretis. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa digitalisasi dalam program kesejahteraan bukanlah alat netral modernisasi, melainkan sebuah rezim tata kelola yang sering kali memperburuk kerawanan pangan sekaligus menciptakan ruang terbatas untuk perlawanan dan bentuk solidaritas alternatif. Dengan membingkai ulang kelaparan di era digital sebagai persoalan kekuasaan, identitas, dan keadilan kultural, artikel ini memberikan kontribusi pada perdebatan dalam ilmu humaniora dan ilmu sosial, menyoroti politik tersembunyi dari kesejahteraan digital serta menawarkan perspektif baru bagi kajian akademik maupun inovasi kebijakan.

Kata kunci: Aristotelian, Abbasiyah, Al-Makmun, dan Penerjemahan

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity remains one of the most urgent challenges of the twenty-first century, affecting more than 828 million people worldwide, with women and children disproportionately represented among the food insecure (FAO, 2021). This gendered dimension of hunger has been repeatedly emphasized by feminist scholars who argue that food insecurity is not merely a question of resource scarcity, but the outcome of deeper structural inequalities rooted in gender, class, and cultural hierarchies (Kabeer, 1999; Mohanty, 2003). In many societies, particularly in the Global South, women lack control over household income, land ownership, and decision-making authority, which intensifies their vulnerability to hunger and malnutrition. These inequalities are further compounded when women belong to marginalized cultural or religious groups that experience multiple layers of discrimination.

In recent years, digital technologies have been promoted as transformative tools for addressing food insecurity. Governments and international organizations have increasingly turned to biometric identity systems, electronic vouchers, and mobile-based cash transfers as mechanisms to improve efficiency, reduce corruption, and ensure transparency in welfare distribution (World Bank, 2020). For instance, India's Aadhaar-linked public distribution system relies on biometric verification to streamline access to subsidized food, while Kenya's M-Pesa platform has been used to deliver cash transfers directly to vulnerable households. These initiatives are often celebrated as modern innovations capable of empowering marginalized populations. Yet, emerging research suggests that such techno-optimism may be misplaced. Theories of digital inequality argue that access to technology is stratified along lines of gender, class, education, and geography (Warschauer, 2003; van Dijk, 2020). Women in marginalized communities are often less likely to own mobile phones, have reliable internet access, or acquire digital literacy skills, while cultural norms and patriarchal household structures may further limit their ability to participate in digital welfare programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic and agricultural perspectives have traditionally dominated the academic debate on food insecurity. Seminal works such as Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999) and the FAO's periodic reports (FAO, 2021) underscore the role of poverty, production, and distribution in shaping hunger. While these approaches remain valuable, they often underplay how social identities, and cultural hierarchies mediate access to food. Feminist and political economy scholars have sought to address this gap by analyzing how patriarchal structures and gendered divisions of labor exacerbate women's deprivation, both within households and in public distribution systems (Fraser, 2016; Kabeer, 1999). This line of research situates hunger within broader dynamics of inequality and highlights how women's food insecurity is entangled with questions of autonomy, recognition, and justice.

Parallel to these developments, research on the digital divide has examined how information and communication technologies reproduce rather than eliminate social inequalities (Warschauer, 2003; van Dijk, 2020). Scholars have shown that digital access is not only about the availability of technology but also about literacy, affordability, cultural norms, and institutional support. While this literature provides important insights into inequality in the digital era, it rarely connects these dynamics to food security. Policy-oriented studies, meanwhile, often emphasize efficiency, transparency, and anti-corruption benefits of digital welfare systems (World Bank, 2020) without addressing the everyday experiences of marginalized populations, particularly women.

A smaller but growing body of scholarship has begun to merge these strands by looking at the intersection of digitalization, gender, and welfare. Critical studies of India's Aadhaar system, for example, reveal how biometric authentication failures disproportionately affect women, the elderly, and rural poor,

often leading to exclusion from subsidized rations (Drèze, 2018). Similarly, feminist digital scholars argue that technological infrastructures are not neutral but reflect power relations that reinforce exclusion along cultural and gendered lines (Eubanks, 2018). Decolonial perspectives further warn that the global push for digital modernization often imports Western-centric models of governance that do not adequately account for local cultural practices of food sharing and solidarity (Mignolo, 2011). These emerging contributions point to the urgent need for a conceptual framework that connects food insecurity, digitalization, and cultural identity, particularly from the perspective of marginalized women.

Research Questions and Scope

Building on these gaps, this paper seeks to situate food insecurity within the broader dynamics of modernization and digital transformation, while emphasizing its cultural, feminist, and decolonial dimensions. The scope of the study is theoretical and conceptual rather than empirical, drawing on library research and critical discourse analysis of scholarly literature, NGO reports, and international policy documents. It focuses primarily on the Global South, where digital welfare systems are expanding rapidly and where the contradictions between modernization and marginalization are most acute.

The guiding research questions of this study are: How do digital technologies in food distribution systems affect marginalized women's access to food security? In what ways do cultural identity markers such as gender, religion, and class shape women's experiences of digital inclusion and exclusion? How can feminist and decolonial frameworks reframe the relationship between digital welfare policies and women's agency? And what policy implications emerge when food insecurity is analyzed through the lens of digital inequality and cultural identity? From these questions, the paper advances several theoretical propositions: first, that digitalization in food security policies often reinforces structural inequalities rather than eliminating them; second, that intersectional feminist and decolonial frameworks reveal how women's food insecurity is shaped not only by material deprivation but also by cultural exclusion and identity-based discrimination; and third, that alternative models of digital welfare must be intersectional and inclusive to transform rather than reproduce inequities..

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a theoretical and conceptual methodology designed to generate new insights rather than report field data. The analysis is based on a wide reading of academic literature, policy documents, and NGO reports that discuss food insecurity, gender inequality, and digital welfare systems. These texts are treated not simply as neutral descriptions but as discursive constructions that frame social problems in particular ways and privilege certain solutions over others. The methodology aims to bring these sources into dialogue through a critical and interpretive lens, allowing for the development of the central concept advanced in this study: the Digital Hunger Regime.

The research follows three interconnected approaches. First, it uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how digital welfare systems are represented in policy narratives. CDA views language as a site of power, revealing how terms like "efficiency," "transparency," and "leakage prevention" are mobilized to justify new technologies, while the risks of exclusion and marginalization are downplayed (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2008). By analyzing these discourses, the study uncovers how digital infrastructures become embedded in broader structures of governance and control.

Second, the methodology is informed by feminist research traditions, which emphasize the importance of centering women's experiences and making visible the gendered structures that shape access to resources (Harding, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991). Feminist methodology does not only apply to empirical interviews or ethnography; it also guides theoretical work by encouraging us to ask whose voices are amplified in policy debates and whose struggles remain invisible. In this paper, feminist perspectives

provide the foundation for examining how digitalization intersects with patriarchal norms, household hierarchies, and cultural identity markers such as religion and class.

Third, the study adopts a decolonial lens to challenge the universalizing tendencies of modernization discourses. Much of the rhetoric around digital welfare emerges from international organizations based in the Global North, which often assume that technological innovation represents progress in all contexts (Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2014). A decolonial methodology highlights how these frameworks may erase local practices of food sharing, solidarity, and community-based resilience. It also calls attention to how digital infrastructures can reproduce colonial patterns of governance, where marginalized populations are rendered visible primarily as targets of surveillance or data extraction rather than as agents of their welfare.

In practical terms, the methodology proceeds through a process of critical interpretive synthesis. Texts from different domains—development economics, feminist political economy, ICT for development, and cultural studies—are read comparatively to identify recurring themes and tensions. For example, where digital welfare reports celebrate efficiency, feminist critiques highlight exclusion; where digital divide literature emphasizes access, decolonial scholars stress cultural erasure. By bringing these strands together, the paper develops an integrated theoretical framework that captures the complex ways digitalization affects women's food security.

This methodology is appropriate to the scope of the study because the research questions are conceptual rather than empirical. The aim is not to measure rates of exclusion or test causal hypotheses but to build a theoretical account of how digital infrastructures and cultural hierarchies combine to govern access to food. In doing so, the paper makes use of secondary sources as evidence while also moving beyond them to propose a new conceptual lens. The originality of the framework lies in showing how hunger is not only a product of economic scarcity or governance failure but also of digital infrastructures that actively shape inclusion and exclusion.

By combining discourse analysis, feminist methodology, and decolonial critique within a coherent interpretive strategy, this study offers a methodology that is both rigorous and generative. It provides the foundation for advancing the concept of the Digital Hunger Regime, while also opening pathways for future empirical research that could test, refine, and extend the framework in different regional and cultural contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this theoretical study suggest that digital technologies are transforming the landscape of food security, but not always in ways that support marginalized women. While governments and international organizations present digital welfare systems as tools for efficiency and transparency, a closer analysis reveals that these initiatives often introduce new forms of exclusion. Access to welfare benefits now depend not only on eligibility but also on digital literacy, access to devices, stable internet connectivity, and the ability to navigate complex authentication systems. For many women living in marginalized communities, these requirements represent substantial barriers. When biometric authentication fails, when women do not have independent control over mobile devices, or when cultural restrictions prevent them from traveling to enrollment centers, digitalization can effectively deny access to food entitlements. In this sense, technology becomes another gatekeeping mechanism rather than a neutral channel of distribution.

Cultural identity further shapes how women experience digital welfare. Gender never acts in isolation but intersects with class, religion, and ethnicity to determine who can successfully participate in these systems. For example, women from poor households often rely on male relatives to control household devices or manage interactions with bureaucratic authorities, reducing their ability to engage

directly with digital systems. Religious or cultural norms may limit women's public mobility, making it more difficult to enroll, update biometric data, or lodge grievances when errors occur. Policy documents and development reports often assume that all citizens are equally capable of interacting with digital platforms, but this assumption erases the very real social and cultural constraints that marginalized women face. As a result, cultural identity plays a decisive role in turning what appears to be an inclusive technological solution into a mechanism that reproduces inequality.

This analysis also underscores the importance of applying feminist and decolonial frameworks to digital food security. A feminist political economy approach highlights that redistribution of resources and recognition of social identity are inseparable. Programs that prioritize efficiency and data management, while ignoring the gendered dynamics of access, risk, and back the very inequalities they claim to resolve. Similarly, a decolonial lens draws attention to how digital welfare is often presented as a universal model of progress, exported from global institutions to the Global South. Such approaches marginalize local forms of solidarity, such as community kitchens or informal women's networks, which frequently provide more immediate and culturally embedded support. At the same time, these theoretical perspectives highlight that women are not passive recipients. Marginalized women use digital tools in creative ways, organizing through messaging platforms, circulating information on rights, and mobilizing grassroots resistance—that challenge dominant narratives of modernization and food policy.

Taken together, these insights show that digitalization in welfare programs must be understood not as a purely technical intervention but as a political process shaped by cultural identity and historical power relations. This reframing fills the literature gap by linking three strands of scholarship that are often discussed separately: food insecurity studies that focus on material scarcity, digital divide research that emphasizes access and literacy, and feminist and decolonial theories that center identity and agency. By combining these perspectives, this paper demonstrates that food insecurity in the digital age encompasses not only the provision of food but also representation, justice, and cultural inclusion.

In answering the research questions, the analysis reveals that digital technologies often reproduce inequalities rather than eliminate them, that cultural identity plays a central role in shaping women's exclusion, that feminist and decolonial theories provide tools for reframing policy debates, and that inclusive approaches must prioritize women's capabilities and voices. These findings support the paper's propositions and contribute to broader discussions on modernization and social transformation. Ultimately, the importance of this analysis lies in its ability to show that digitalization, unless approached through intersectional and culturally sensitive policies, risks reinforcing hunger among those who are already the most vulnerable.

The insights developed in this paper point toward a new way of understanding how hunger is governed in the digital age. This research paper proposes the concept of the Digital Hunger Regime to capture the intertwined technological, cultural, and political dynamics that determine who have access to food security under digital welfare systems. The notion of a "regime" is drawn from critical theories of power that understand governance not only as explicit policy decisions but also as the everyday infrastructures, rules, and norms that shape life chances. In the case of food insecurity, digital systems such as biometric identification, e-wallets, or online grievance portals have become central to the very process of deciding who is entitled to eat. Hunger, therefore, is no longer a product of scarcity alone, but also of digital infrastructures that function as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

The Birth of A New Concept

The Digital Hunger Regime rests on several dimensions that make it distinct from earlier discussions of the digital divide or food distribution. First, it emphasizes the role of technological infrastructures as instruments of control. Unlike the traditional welfare state, where paper-based records or community-

level distribution often allowed room for negotiation, digital welfare programs rely on machine-readable data and automated authentication. A failed biometric match, a disconnected network, or an error in data entry can instantly sever access to food benefits. These are not isolated technical problems but structured features of a system that positions technology as the gatekeeper of survival.

Second, the concept underscores the cultural mediation of digital access. Marginalized women are not situated in neutral spaces when they interact with digital platforms. Their ability to use technology is deeply shaped by patriarchal household dynamics, religious norms, and community expectations. For example, in households where men control devices or where cultural restrictions limit women's mobility, the seemingly simple task of updating digital records becomes a formidable barrier. This reveals that the Digital Hunger Regime does not act uniformly; it is stratified by gender, class, ethnicity, and religion, reproducing hierarchies rather than overcoming them.

Third, the regime is sustained through what might be called bureaucratic rationality and algorithmic governance. Digital welfare systems are justified in the language of efficiency, transparency, and modernization. Yet their neutrality is deceptive, as the rules embedded in software and data management practices encode assumptions about who counts as a deserving citizen. When errors occur, they are often attributed to individual failure, such as illiteracy or negligence, rather than to systemic flaws. This shifts responsibility away from institutions and onto already marginalized individuals, consolidating the regime's authority while silencing those most affected.

At the same time, the Digital Hunger Regime is not absolute. It produces resistance and counter-practices that show how women and communities re-appropriate digital tools for their survival. Informal networks use messaging applications to coordinate food-sharing. Grassroots women's groups employ crowdfunding platforms to support families in crisis, and activists deploy digital storytelling to reframe hunger as a rights issue rather than a matter of private misfortune. These practices expose the cracks in the regime and demonstrate that even in tightly governed systems, marginalized groups exercise agency and generate alternative forms of solidarity.

The development of this concept is significant because it fills a gap in existing scholarships. Research on food insecurity has long focused on production, distribution, and caloric access, while digital divide studies have concentrated on connectivity and skills. Feminist and decolonial theories, meanwhile, have drawn attention to the intersections of gender, identity, and development but have not yet articulated how digital infrastructures actively govern hunger. The Digital Hunger Regime synthesizes these strands into a single analytical framework. It shifts the discussion from digital access as a technical problem to digital hunger as a structural and cultural phenomenon produced by modernization itself.

By naming this process, the Digital Hunger Regime makes visible the hidden politics of digital welfare. It shows that hunger in the digital era is not only a matter of insufficient food or weak entitlements but also the outcome of how technologies, bureaucracies, and cultural hierarchies interact to regulate who eats and who does not. This contribution extends current debates by offering a new theoretical lens through which the relationship between modernization, digitalization, and food insecurity can be understood.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry several important implications for policy and practice in addressing food insecurity in the digital era. By situating food insecurity within the intersecting frameworks of gender, cultural identity, and digital modernization, the research demonstrates that hunger cannot be reduced to a question of resource scarcity alone. Policies that prioritize technical efficiency and digital rollout without addressing cultural and social inequalities risk reproducing exclusionary structures. Governments and institutions, therefore, need to rethink welfare design through an intersectional lens that actively accounts

for the experiences of marginalized women, whose access to food is mediated not only by poverty but also by cultural hierarchies and digital barriers.

A central implication is the need to develop inclusive digital infrastructures. Biometric authentication, mobile-based entitlement systems, and online platforms should be designed with sensitivity to variations in literacy, connectivity, and household power relations. Providing non-digital alternatives, community facilitation, and localized grievance redress mechanisms can ensure that modernization does not inadvertently deny entitlements to those most in need. Digitalization must serve as a facilitator of access rather than as a new gatekeeping structure.

Another key insight is the importance of cultural integration in food security programs. The displacement of traditional practices such as community kitchens, kinship-based food sharing, and women-led solidarity groups weakens resilience in times of crisis. Policymakers should aim not to erase these practices but to strengthen them by creating hybrid models that combine digital platforms with existing community structures. Supporting women's cooperatives through digital marketplaces or enabling culturally embedded distribution networks to interface with welfare systems, could enhance both efficiency and inclusivity.

Finally, the study calls for a stronger focus on accountability and social justice in welfare governance. Exclusions resulting from technical errors or bureaucratic rigidities must be acknowledged as systemic failures rather than framed as individual shortcomings. Establishing independent monitoring, transparent feedback systems, and participatory decision-making spaces would allow marginalized women to voice their concerns and influence policy design. In this way, the broader research not only identifies structural gaps but also offers a pathway for reimagining welfare as a democratic, culturally sensitive, and gender-just process.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how digital technologies, while often presented as solutions to inefficiency and corruption in welfare distribution, can simultaneously reproduce and intensify structural inequalities in food security. By drawing on feminist, decolonial, and cultural perspectives, the analysis has shown that women from marginalized communities are uniquely vulnerable to exclusion when access to food becomes mediated by digital infrastructures such as biometric identification, mobile platforms, and online entitlement systems. These technologies are not neutral tools but active instruments of governance that shape who is included, who is excluded, and how hunger itself is experienced.

The central theoretical contribution of this paper is the development of the concept of the Digital Hunger Regime, which captures how technological infrastructures, bureaucratic rationalities, and cultural hierarchies converge to regulate access to food. Unlike traditional accounts of the digital divide that focus primarily on access and connectivity, the notion of a Digital Hunger Regime foregrounds how hunger is actively produced through systemic design and institutional practices. This conceptual framework provides a new lens for understanding food insecurity in the digital era, emphasizing that modernization projects framed as progressive may in fact perpetuate old patterns of marginalization under new technological forms.

The implications of this study extend beyond theory to the domain of policy and practice. If digital welfare systems are to serve as genuine tools of empowerment, they must be designed with attention to intersectional inequalities and cultural contexts. Policies should ensure multi-channel access for those without digital literacy, create grievance redressal systems that are transparent and accessible, and support women's agencies by recognizing their central role in household food security. Moreover, decolonial sensitivity is necessary to avoid imposing universalist technological models that erase local practices of

solidarity and care. Without such considerations, digitalization risks becoming a mechanism of exclusion rather than inclusion.

Finally, while this study has been conceptual in scope, it opens important avenues for empirical research. Future work could examine how digital hunger regimes manifest in specific national contexts, trace the lived experiences of women navigating digital welfare systems, and investigate strategies of resistance and adaptation within marginalized communities. Such inquiries would not only test and refine the framework proposed here but also contribute to the development of more just and inclusive approaches to food security in the digital age.

In conclusion, by sitting in food insecurity within the dynamics of digital transformation and cultural identity, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how modernization reshapes vulnerability and agency. The concept of the Digital Hunger Regime offers both scholars and policymakers a critical tool for recognizing the hidden politics of digital welfare and for envisioning pathways toward more equitable futures.

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