

Social Media as a Contested Arena of Gender Inclusion among Generation Z: Digital Activism, Identity Construction, and Platform Risks from a Sociological Perspective

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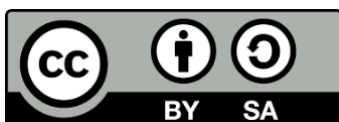
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Abstract

Social media occupies a central position in Generation Z's everyday life and creates new spaces for gender learning, identity expression, solidarity, and activism. Yet digital visibility does not automatically produce substantive inclusion because platforms can also intensify stereotypes, objectification, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, and algorithmic bias. This article analyzes the sociological mechanisms through which social media simultaneously expands and constrains gender inclusion among Generation Z. The study employs an integrative literature review of 38 selected sources comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical works, and official institutional publications. The search prioritizes publications from 2020–2026 while retaining selected foundational works for conceptual framing. The synthesis identifies four interrelated dimensions of digital gender inclusion: epistemic inclusion through access to and negotiation of gender knowledge; expressive-representational inclusion through voice, visibility, and identity construction; relational-mobilizational inclusion through support networks and collective action; and protective-governance inclusion shaped by safety, moderation, literacy, and platform accountability. The findings also show that greater visibility can heighten vulnerability to harassment, misogyny, body surveillance, and algorithmic discrimination. The article develops the concept of a “visibility–vulnerability paradox” to explain why social media can operate as a space of empowerment and exclusion at the same time. The study argues that digital gender policy should move beyond access and exposure toward safe, equitable, meaningful, and sustainable participation.

Keywords: Social Media; Gender Inclusion; Generation Z; Digital Feminism; Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence



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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has shifted important processes of socialization, identity formation, knowledge production, and public participation into platform environments. In Indonesia, BPS-Statistics Indonesia (2025) reported that 72.78% of the population accessed the internet in 2024, indicating the growing integration of digital interaction into everyday social life. For Generation Z people who grew up alongside smartphones, the internet, and social media platforms are not merely communication channels. They are social environments in which values, aspirations, identities, and boundaries of social acceptance are negotiated. Any discussion of gender inclusion among young people therefore needs to consider how technological architecture, user cultures, attention economies, and power relations intersect.

From a sociological perspective, gender reality is not external to communication. Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain that social reality is produced, institutionalized, and internalized through interaction and shared knowledge. On social media, these processes become faster and measurable: users create content, repeat narratives, comment on symbols, and produce classifications of what counts as feminine, masculine, desirable, attractive, respectable, or deviant. Ward and Grower (2020) show that media contribute to the development of gender-role stereotypes among children and adolescents, while Gales (2023) demonstrates that Generation Z women continue to encounter gendered expectations, including beauty pressures mediated through social media. Platforms can therefore function as sites of deconstruction and reproduction at once.

Social media power also derives from networked communication. Castells (2010) identifies communication networks as a defining structure of contemporary society, while research on activism demonstrates how digital networks connect personal experiences with collective agendas. Storer and Rodriguez (2020), Loney-Howes et al. (2022), Roth-Cohen (2022), and Lindqvist and Lindgren (2023) show how hashtags, testimony, framing, and user connectivity can transform experiences of violence or inequality into public issues. In Asia, Alingasa and Ofreneo (2021) illustrate how hashtag activism can contest misogynistic positioning and generate solidarity. These mechanisms are particularly relevant to Generation Z because young people increasingly encounter feminist knowledge through influencers, digital communities, short videos, memes, and platform conversations (Kanai & Zeng, 2024).

In Indonesia, social media has become a significant medium for women's activism and gender advocacy. Purwaningtyas (2021) documents how women's activist accounts on Instagram circulate feminist and empowerment knowledge among younger audiences. Ratnasari et al. (2021) show that the *Awas KBGO!* campaign used social media for information, mobilization, and advocacy around online gender-based violence. Hermanto (2022) finds that Jakarta Feminist bridges global feminist discourses with local agendas, while Wijdan et al. (2024) map communication strategies used by Indonesian feminist movements in digital spaces. More directly relevant to Generation Z, Sair et al. (2025) show that TikTok has become a space in which young women in East Java negotiate gender norms and cultural change.

However, the literature also warns that access and visibility are not equivalent to equality. Nanditha (2022) demonstrates that digital feminist movements can reproduce intersectional exclusions. Vachhani (2024) argues that networked feminism produces opportunities for solidarity while simultaneously generating vulnerability, conflict, and new hierarchies. Scharff (2024) shows how digital feminism can be absorbed into monetization and self-branding logics, potentially privileging voices that are more marketable. At the technical level, Fosch-Villaronga et al. (2021) demonstrate that automated gender inference can misclassify users and reinforce binary gender assumptions, while Schroeder (2021) warns that algorithms can reinscribe hierarchical gender categories even amid wider cultural recognition of gender diversity.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is another major constraint. Henry and Powell (2018) and Henry et al. (2020) show that online sexual harassment, cyberstalking, image-based abuse, and digital control have distinctly gendered patterns. The systematic review by Koch et al. (2026) further shows that technology-facilitated abuse can create psychological consequences and encourage women to reduce or abandon public participation. For younger users, UNICEF Indonesia (2023) documents substantial exposure to online risks, while the United Nations (2024) emphasizes that women and people experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination face heightened risks in digital ecosystems.

The research gap addressed here concerns the tendency to examine activism, representation, safety, or algorithms in isolation. Policy discussions also frequently use access, exposure, or visibility as indicators of inclusion, although a person can be highly visible yet unsafe, informed yet unable to speak, or able to participate while carrying disproportionate emotional and reputational costs. To address this gap, the article constructs a four-dimensional model of digital gender inclusion and develops the concept of the visibility vulnerability paradox. This concept refers to the way in which the same mechanisms that expand voice virality, searchability, recommendation, hashtags, and public testimony can also increase exposure to harassment, objectification, data exploitation, and algorithmic judgment.

The study therefore asks three questions: Through what mechanisms does social media expand gender inclusion among Generation Z? What social and technical mechanisms reproduce gender exclusion in platform environments? And how can the tension between empowerment and vulnerability be explained sociologically? The article aims to provide a non-deterministic synthesis of technology, strengthen the contribution of digital sociology and gender studies, and formulate more concrete implications for education, communities, platforms, and public policy.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts an integrative literature review design. The approach is appropriate because the aim is not to estimate a pooled effect or evaluate a single intervention, but to integrate findings across sociology, gender studies, digital media, communication, media psychology, and technology-facilitated violence in order to construct a more comprehensive sociological explanation. An integrative review also permits the combination of qualitative and quantitative empirical studies, systematic reviews, and selected theoretical works, provided that their analytical functions are clearly distinguished.

A targeted search was conducted across verifiable journal and publisher platforms and academic search channels. Bibliographic verification drew on Taylor & Francis, SAGE, Elsevier/ScienceDirect, Wiley, PubMed, Annual Reviews, and Indonesian journal portals. Search terms combined English and Indonesian expressions such as “social media gender inclusion,” “Generation Z gender social media,” “digital feminism,” “hashtag feminism,” “online gender-based violence,” “technology-facilitated gender-based violence,” “gender stereotypes social media,” “algorithmic gender bias,” “youth feminist knowledge cultures,” “media sosial kesetaraan gender,” “Generasi Z feminisme digital,” and “KBGO Indonesia.”

The inclusion criteria were: (1) direct relevance to social media/digital platforms and gender; (2) attention to adolescents, youth, Generation Z, feminist activism, stereotypes, representation, safety, or platform governance; (3) peer-reviewed publication, mainly from 2020–2026; (4) verifiable bibliographic metadata; and (5) for Indonesian sources, a clear relationship with women’s activism, online gender-based violence, gender norms, or young people’s platform use. Pre-2020 work was retained only when it served as a foundational theory or a major reference on technology-facilitated violence. Promotional materials, non-academic opinion, and publications in which social media was peripheral were excluded.

The final corpus comprises 38 sources: 32 peer-reviewed journal articles and six supporting sources consisting of theoretical books and official institutional publications. Twenty-seven references are articles in reputable international journals, representing approximately 71% of all references and exceeding the 65% threshold. Indonesian studies were retained to preserve contextual sensitivity, while international research was used to broaden conceptual and comparative insights. Official statistics were used sparingly to contextualize internet penetration and online risks rather than substitute for peer-reviewed evidence.

The analysis used thematic synthesis in four stages. First, each source was examined for meaning units related to gender knowledge, identity/representation, networks/activism, safety, stereotypes, algorithmic bias, and digital inequality. Second, these units were grouped into four dimensions of inclusion: epistemic; expressive-representational; relational-mobilizational; and protective-governance. Third, benefits and risks were compared across studies to identify recurring and contradictory mechanisms. Fourth, the themes were interpreted using social construction, network society, and critical feminist platform perspectives to formulate the visibility–vulnerability paradox.

Because this is an integrative review, the findings are not intended to provide prevalence estimates or statistical representation of all Indonesian Generation Z users. Generation Z is not homogeneous; experiences vary by gender, class, location, education, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality. Conclusions are therefore formulated at the level of social and institutional mechanisms rather than as universal claims about all young platform users.

Table 1. Analytical dimension, Key indicators and Synthesis question

Analytical dimension	Key indicators	Synthesis question
Epistemic	Access to knowledge, literacy, meaning negotiation	Do platforms broaden gender knowledge and the capacity to evaluate narratives?
Expressive-representational	Voice, identity, visibility, representation	Who can speak and become visible, and under what conditions?
Relational-mobilizational	Solidarity, support, communities, activism	How are digital connections converted into support or collective action?
Protective-governance	Safety, moderation, algorithms, privacy, access	Can participation remain safe, equitable, and accountable?

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The synthesis indicates that social media does not produce inclusion through a single pathway. Four mechanisms recur across the literature and are mutually dependent. This matters because a platform may perform strongly on one dimension such as information access while remaining weak on another, such as protection from harassment. Gender inclusion must therefore be assessed through the combination of access, voice, relationships, and safety.

First, social media expands epistemic inclusion. Short-form video, infographics, podcasts, testimony, and educational accounts make gender issues that once circulated primarily in academic or organizational spaces easier to find and debate. Purwaningtyas (2021) documents this role among Indonesian women's activist accounts. Kanai and Zeng (2024) further show that young users do not simply receive feminist knowledge in a linear way; they negotiate influencer credibility, compare positions, and construct their own hierarchies of expertise. Platforms therefore operate as informal learning environments as well as contested knowledge markets.

Epistemic inclusion is not inherently progressive. Ward and Grower (2020) demonstrate the continuing importance of media in gender stereotype development, while Gales (2023) shows that Generation Z women face beauty pressures and gendered expectations through social media. Information abundance is therefore not equivalent to information quality. Recommendation systems can repeatedly expose users to content aligned with existing engagement patterns and create differentiated trajectories of visibility. In this context, gender-responsive digital literacy includes not only searching for information but also recognizing stereotyping, commercialization, framing, and platform bias.

Second, social media expands expressive-representational inclusion by lowering some barriers to public voice. Clark-Parsons (2021) shows how networked visibility in #MeToo enabled individual experiences to receive collective recognition. Boling (2020) demonstrates how memes and participatory media can elevate feminist concerns into wider public conversations, while Alingasa and Ofreneo (2021) show how hashtags can be used to reclaim women's identities as powerful political subjects. Among younger people, Marston (2024) demonstrates that digital spaces can create new possibilities for exploring gendered bodies and identities beyond offline representational constraints.

Yet visibility is unevenly distributed. Nanditha (2022) warns that digital feminist movements can reproduce intersectional exclusion. Scharff (2024) shows how monetization, self-branding, and authenticity shape who receives attention. Technical classification can also become a source of exclusion: Fosch-Villaronga et al. (2021) demonstrate that automated gender inference can be inaccurate and reinforce binary categories. Inclusive representation therefore requires acknowledging that platforms are not neutral stages; visibility is structured through design, policy, data, and the attention economy.

Third, social media strengthens relational and mobilizational inclusion. Networks allow users to find others with similar experiences, transform private problems into collective consciousness, and coordinate hashtag-based action. Storer and Rodriguez (2020) demonstrate how feminist campaigns challenge victim-blaming and contribute to movement building, while Loney-Howes et al. (2022) emphasize the role of digital testimony in making the structural conditions of sexual violence visible. Roth-Cohen (2022), Lindqvist and Lindgren (2023), and Sigurdardottir et al. (2024) further show that digital networks can generate affective solidarity, shared frames, and mobilization across geographical space.

Indonesia reflects similar mechanisms. Ratnasari et al. (2021) show that the *Awas KBGO!* campaign used social media for information, mobilization, and survivor advocacy. Hermanto (2022) finds that Jakarta Feminist adapts global feminist discourse to local agendas. Winarnita et al. (2022) show that Indonesian women's digital participation can contest gendered ideals and coordinate social and political activism. Wijdan et al. (2024) likewise identify educational content, interactivity, and network-building as central strategies in Indonesian feminist digital communication.

Fourth, protective-governance inclusion is the condition that most strongly determines sustainability. Henry and Powell (2018) and Henry et al. (2020) demonstrate that technology can facilitate sexual harassment, cyberstalking, image-based abuse, and coercive control. Koch et al. (2026) show that gendered attacks against publicly active women can alter communication behavior, reduce engagement, and encourage withdrawal from platforms or public roles. If some groups must carry a far higher cost in order to be visible, then increased participation cannot be treated as substantive inclusion.

Direct abuse is not the only constraint. Visual pressure and objectification can also undermine participation. Vendemia and Fox (2024) find that sexualized images of young women on social media can intensify objectifying responses and appearance-focused commentary, while the systematic review by Vincente-Benito and Ramírez-Durán (2023) links social media use with body-image and well-being concerns among adolescents and

young adults. Digital gender safety therefore includes both protection from explicit attacks and the reduction of communication environments that normalize body surveillance, insecurity, and gendered performance pressures.

Taken together, the findings show that digital gender inclusion is layered. Access to information can enable awareness; visibility can enable recognition; networks can enable solidarity; but without protection, accountability, and fair distribution of visibility, these benefits remain fragile. Social media is therefore best conceptualized as an infrastructure of contestation rather than a technology that automatically generates equality.

Table 2. Mechanism Inclusive potential Exclusion risk Key sources

Mechanism	Inclusive potential	Exclusion risk	Key sources
Knowledge	Access to gender information; informal learning; meaning negotiation	Misinformation; stereotypes; issue simplification	Ward & Grower, 2020; Kanai & Zeng, 2024; Purwaningtyas, 2021
Visibility/identity	Voice, self-representation, counter-narratives	Objectification; tokenism; attention hierarchies	Clark-Parsons, 2021; Gales, 2023; Marston, 2024
Networks/action	Solidarity, support, hashtag activism, mobilization	Intersectional exclusion; conflict; burnout	Storer & Rodriguez, 2020; Nanditha, 2022; Vachhani, 2024
Platform/governance	Moderation and safety-by-design can sustain participation	Harassment, misgendering, algorithmic bias, datafication	Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021; Henry et al., 2020; Koch et al., 2026

Discussion

The findings reinforce a sociological view in which technology has no social effect independent of its institutional and cultural context. From a social construction perspective, social media is a site of externalization when users express gendered experiences and values; objectivation when repeated content becomes shared knowledge; and internalization when those narratives subsequently shape identities and orientations to action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). What differentiates platform environments from conventional interaction is that these processes are mediated by engagement metrics, algorithmic recommendation, virality, and datafication. Gender reality is therefore co-produced through interpersonal interaction and platform infrastructures.

Network society theory helps explain the expansion of scale but must be combined with an analysis of power. Castells (2010) highlights the capacity of communication networks to accelerate information circulation and connection, yet networks are not flat. Some actors possess larger followings, stronger social capital, better production resources, and greater institutional legitimacy, while platforms govern recommendation and moderation. Vachhani (2024) demonstrates that networked feminism involves productive tensions between connectivity and vulnerability. Connectivity should therefore not be equated with equality; it can magnify inequality when attention and influence are concentrated among already-resourced actors.

The four-dimensional framework proposed here corrects an access-centered bias. Epistemic inclusion requires that users not only receive information but also evaluate sources, contexts, and interests shaping that information. Expressive-representational inclusion requires voice to be not merely technically possible but socially receivable without conformity to stereotypes or commercial logic. Relational-mobilizational inclusion requires connectivity to generate support and collective capacity rather than fleeting engagement. Protective-governance inclusion requires platforms and institutions to reduce the disproportionate participation costs borne by women and gender minorities.

These dimensions generate the visibility–vulnerability paradox. Social media can provide visibility when mainstream institutions ignore or silence particular experiences. Clark-Parsons (2021) shows how networked feminist visibility can perform recognition and solidarity, while Loney-Howes et al. (2022) show how digital activist traces contribute to a collective memory of sexual violence. Yet visibility also makes users more searchable, commentable, attackable, datafied, and classifiable. Koch et al. (2026) show that technology-facilitated abuse can produce self-censorship and withdrawal. Movement success should therefore not be assessed solely through reach; it also requires examining whether visible participants retain agency, safety, and the capacity to remain engaged.

This paradox is particularly relevant to Generation Z because platforms function as major sites of socialization. Gales (2023) demonstrates that Gen Z women navigate career stereotypes and appearance pressures through social media, while Sair et al. (2025) show TikTok as an arena in which young Indonesian women negotiate gender norms. Kanai and Zeng (2024) further show that young people actively evaluate claims to feminist expertise. These studies challenge the assumption that Generation Z is automatically more gender egalitarian because it is more digital. Exposure to equality discourse can coexist with beauty pressures, anti-feminist backlash, and attention hierarchies.

Algorithmic systems deepen these tensions. Fosch-Villaronga et al. (2021) show that automated gender inference can misclassify users, particularly when identities do not fit binary categories. Schroeder (2021) argues that algorithms may reinscribe hierarchical gender categories. The problem is not simply that 'algorithms are biased' in the abstract; it concerns the relationship among training data, platform categories, commercial objectives, and design choices. When attention is the primary economic resource, controversial or stereotypical content may acquire particular circulation incentives. Gender inclusion therefore requires transparency in recommendation systems, gender impact assessment, meaningful user controls, and accessible moderation appeals.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence represents the clearest form of unequal participation cost. Henry and Powell (2018) identify age-, gender-, and sexuality-based dimensions of digital sexual violence, while Henry et al. (2020) extend the analysis to domestic and sexual violence facilitated through digital technologies. The United Nations (2024) emphasizes that technology-facilitated violence is connected to offline discrimination and disproportionately affects women with public visibility and those experiencing intersecting disadvantage. Approaches that place the burden solely on victims to block, restrict, or leave platforms risk privatizing a structural problem. Responsibility must also be assigned to platforms, states, educational institutions, communities, and the technology industry.

Users nevertheless exercise important forms of agency. Schoettler (2023) shows that feminist activists curate their feeds, block and mute accounts, build communities of care, and strategically step away from social media to sustain participation. Such practices are important components of young people's digital well-being and safety literacy. Yet individual agency cannot substitute for structural reform. If safety depends entirely on an individual's skill, time, network, and device quality, users with greater resources will be better protected, reproducing social inequality through digital mechanisms.

Indonesian research demonstrates the importance of local context. Purwaningtyas (2021), Ratnasari et al. (2021), Hermanto (2022), and Wijdan et al. (2024) show that global gender issues are translated through local language, culture, organizations, and political problems. Winarnita et al. (2022) also identify forms of gendered digital citizenship in Indonesia. Policy transfer from global contexts should therefore not be mechanical. Gender-responsive digital literacy needs to be attentive to family norms, religion, class, regional

inequality, and platform preferences, while general principles of safety, non-discrimination, privacy, accountable moderation, and access to remedy remain applicable.

The first implication concerns education. Schools and universities should move beyond technical digital skills and misinformation checking to include gender stereotypes, digital consent, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, privacy, and bystander intervention. Curricula should also help students understand how influencers, advertising, filters, and algorithms shape body standards and relationship norms. This connects epistemic inclusion with safety and agency.

The second implication concerns platform design and governance. Platforms should provide accessible and consistent reporting mechanisms that account for gendered abuse, reduce the use of search and recommendation tools for coordinated harassment, strengthen policies against doxing and image-based abuse, and provide greater transparency around moderation decisions. Gender classification should not be inferred when it is unnecessary for the service. Algorithmic audits and gender-sensitive risk assessment are particularly important for recommendation, advertising, search, and distribution systems.

The third implication concerns communities and support services. Digital activism can provide a gateway to support, but organizations need safety protocols, psychosocial referral pathways, evidence documentation procedures, and legal assistance. Communities that rely exclusively on virality are vulnerable to burnout and targeted attacks. Networked feminism therefore requires durable solidarity infrastructure that can persist beyond trending cycles (Vachhani, 2024). Online and offline organizational capacity should be treated as one ecosystem.

The fourth implication concerns research. Future studies should empirically test the four-dimensional model among Indonesian Gen Z using surveys, interviews, and cross-platform digital ethnography. Potential variables include exposure to gender content, gender-digital literacy, perceived safety, experiences of abuse, self-censorship, trust in moderation, activism participation, and perceptions of algorithmic visibility. Comparative research across TikTok, Instagram, X, YouTube, and messaging platforms is important because their affordances differ. Analysis should also be disaggregated by gender identity, class, location, disability, and sexuality rather than treating Generation Z as a single social category.

The article's theoretical contribution lies in shifting the question from "does social media promote gender equality?" to "under what sociotechnical conditions does social media enable safe and equitable gender participation?" This shift avoids technological determinism. Platforms can produce counterpublics, solidarity, and learning, but they can also commodify feminism, repeat stereotypes, distribute visibility unevenly, and facilitate violence. Substantive inclusion occurs only when expanded expressive opportunities are matched by protection and a redistribution of power.

CONCLUSIONS

This review shows that social media is a contested arena of gender inclusion for Generation Z. Platforms widen access to gender knowledge, provide spaces for expression and counter-narratives, build support communities, and facilitate networked activism. In Indonesia, these functions are visible in feminist knowledge circulation, online gender-based violence campaigns, localization of global feminist agendas, and the negotiation of gender norms among young users. Yet these benefits are neither automatic nor equally distributed.

The four dimensions of inclusion epistemic, expressive-representational, relational-mobilizational, and protective-governance demonstrate that access is a starting point rather than an endpoint. Users can have access while still being silenced; they can be visible while being exploited; and they can be connected while being unsafe. This tension is captured by the visibility-vulnerability paradox: the same digital mechanisms that expand voice and

solidarity can also increase exposure to misogyny, objectification, technology-facilitated violence, and discriminatory algorithmic classification.

Digital gender inclusion therefore requires a multi-level strategy. Education should integrate gender-responsive digital literacy and safety; communities need support infrastructures and security protocols; platforms must improve moderation, transparency, privacy, and gender impact auditing; and governments need accessible protection and remedy pathways. Inclusion should be evaluated not by the number of users or viral posts, but by whether diverse users can participate safely, meaningfully, equitably, and sustainably.

The study is limited by its integrative-review design, which is not intended to estimate prevalence, and by the relatively limited Indonesian evidence that directly measures gender inclusion among Generation Z. Future research should test the proposed model using primary data and compare experiences across platforms and social groups. Even with these limitations, the synthesis provides a stronger sociological framework for connecting digital activism, identity construction, violence risks, and platform governance within a single analysis.

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