eISSN 3139-2377
RESEARCH WORK
A Monthly, Open Access, Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Volume 02, Issue 10, October 2026 DOI- https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24217556

Gender Violence in the Age of Globalization

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Received: 31 July 2026 Accepted & Reviewed: 25 Oct 2026, Published: 31 October 2026

Abstract

Globalization has redesigned the scale, forms, and visibility of violence directed at women and gender minorities. This paper examines how transnational economic integration, labor migration, digital connectivity, and the diffusion of cultural norms interact with entrenched patriarchal structures to reproduce, and in some respects, deepen gender violence worldwide. Drawing on feminist international relations theory, intersectionality, and structural violence frameworks, the analysis traces four interlocking mechanisms: the feminization of labor migration and its exposure of women to exploitation; the growth of transnational human trafficking as a byproduct of deregulated labor markets; the emergence of technology-facilitated violence enabled by borderless digital platforms; and the gendered effects of militarization and armed conflict under globalized arms and resource economies. Regional illustrations from Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia demonstrate that globalization's effects are not uniform but are refracted through local political economies and cultural histories. The further reviews global governance responses, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the RESPECT framework, and regional instruments such as the Maputo protocol, while engaging postcolonial feminist critiques of universalizing human rights discourse. It concludes that effective prevention requires multilevel, intersectional strategies that simultaneously address economic precarity, digital governance and normative change.

Keywords: *gender-based violence, feminist theory, transnational migration, technology-facilitated violence.*

Introduction

Gender-based violence is not a new phenomenon, but the forces of globalization have reshaped how it is produced, experienced, and contested. Economic integration, transnational migration, digital connectivity, and the global circulation of armed conflict have created new pathways through which women and girls encounter violence, while also opening new arenas of resistance and international accountability. The World Health Organization estimates that nearly one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime, a figure that has remained largely stable even as the world has become more economically and socially interconnected (World Health Organization, 2024). This persistence, despite decades of international commitments to gender equality, suggests that globalization has not simply diffused liberal norms of protection outward from wealthy states; it has also generated new structural conditions, and in some cases intensified old ones, that make women vulnerable to violence in the home, the workplace, the market, and cyberspace. This paper argues that gender violence under globalization cannot be understood as a series of isolated national problems but must be analysed as a phenomenon embedded within global economic restructuring, militarized conflict, digital technology, and the transnational feminist movements that have arisen to confront it.

Conceptualizing Globalization and Gendered Power:

Globalization is commonly described as the intensification of economic, political, cultural, and technological interconnection across national borders. Feminist scholars, however, caution against treating globalization as a gender-neutral process. True (2012) develops a feminist political economy approach that traces violence

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against women to the intersections between household relations and macro-structural processes operating at the local, national, and transnational levels. In this framework, violence is not merely an interpersonal failure but a structural outcome of how economic restructuring redistributes power, income, and vulnerability along gendered lines. When trade liberalization displaces male breadwinners from formal employment, for instance, some men respond to this loss of status through increased domestic violence, even as women simultaneously gain new, if precarious, footholds in export-oriented labor markets (True, 2012). Globalization therefore does not simply add new causes of violence onto existing patriarchal structures; it reconfigures the terrain on which those structures operate, sometimes eroding traditional forms of male authority while offering few alternative, non-violent means of renegotiating gender relations. Enloe's (2014) analysis of the global political economy makes a related point: militaries, corporations, and international institutions all depend on gendered labor, and the maintenance of that dependence often requires the normalization of forms of control and coercion directed at women, from military base economies to export-processing zones. Understanding gender violence in the global era therefore requires attention not only to individual perpetrators but to the institutions, markets, and power structures that make certain forms of violence functional or even profitable within a globalized system.

Economic Globalization, Labor Migration, and Precarity

One of the clearest sites where globalization reshapes gender violence is in the transnational movement of female labor. Economic globalization has drawn millions of women from lower-income countries into export manufacturing, domestic service, and care work abroad, often through informal or precarious labor arrangements that limit legal protection. Migrant domestic workers, frequently isolated inside private households with limited access to legal recourse, are especially vulnerable to physical, sexual, and economic abuse by employers and labor recruiters (True, 2012). The same economic logic that makes women's labor cheap and flexible for global supply chains also renders that labor difficult to regulate, creating conditions in which abuse can occur with relative impunity. Human trafficking represents an extreme manifestation of this dynamic: the same infrastructures of transport, communication, and financial transfer that facilitate legitimate global commerce also facilitate the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Because trafficking networks operate across multiple jurisdictions, no single national government can fully regulate them, and enforcement gaps between origin, transit, and destination countries are routinely exploited by traffickers. Export-processing zones, created explicitly to attract foreign investment through low labor costs and reduced regulation, illustrate a further paradox of globalization: while providing many women with income and a degree of independence from patriarchal household structures, they simultaneously expose workers to hazardous conditions, sexual harassment, and reduced union protection, since regulatory environments are often deliberately weakened to remain competitive in global markets (True, 2012). Financial crises linked to globalized capital markets compound these vulnerabilities. Periods of economic liberalization and financial instability have been associated with spikes in intimate partner and family violence, as households absorb economic shocks that ripple outward from global financial centres to local communities with little capacity to buffer the impact (True, 2012). In this sense, gender violence functions as a hidden social cost of an integrated global economy, borne disproportionately by women whose labor sustains that economy but whose protection is not correspondingly globalized.

Conflict, Militarization, and the Globalization of Violence

Globalization has also transformed the character of armed conflict and, with it, the character of conflict-related sexual violence. Contemporary wars increasingly involve transnational networks of arms trafficking, foreign fighters, multinational peacekeeping forces, and globally financed insurgencies, all of which create new

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opportunities and justifications for violence against women. Sexual violence has long been used as a tactic of war, but its documentation, prosecution, and politicization have become globalized processes in their own right, as international tribunals, human rights organizations, and global media networks bring local atrocities into international view (True, 2012). Merry's (2006) study of the translation of international human rights law into local justice systems shows that global legal norms condemning gender violence do not automatically transform local practice; instead, they must be actively reinterpreted, resisted, or appropriated by local actors, a process she terms vernacularization. This means that international frameworks such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security can raise global awareness of conflict-related sexual violence without necessarily reducing its incidence on the ground, particularly where peacekeeping missions themselves have been implicated in exploitation and abuse. The globalization of conflict economies, in which armed groups fund themselves through the illicit global trade in minerals, drugs, or other resources, has also been linked to elevated levels of sexual violence in resource-rich conflict zones, where control over both territory and women's bodies becomes a strategic and economic asset (True, 2012). Post-conflict reconstruction, frequently guided by internationally funded programs, adds a further layer of complexity: reconstruction efforts can either entrench pre-existing gender hierarchies or serve as an opening for renegotiating them, depending on whether women's organizations are meaningfully included in peacebuilding and governance processes.

Digital Globalization and Technology-Facilitated Violence

The globalization of digital communication has created an entirely new domain in which gender violence is enacted and, at times, resisted. Social media platforms, messaging applications, and globally networked infrastructure allow harassment, image-based abuse, stalking, and coordinated online harassment campaigns to cross national borders instantly, often outpacing the capacity of any single national legal system to respond. Because digital platforms are typically owned and governed by multinational corporations headquartered outside the jurisdictions in which harm occurs, victims frequently face significant obstacles in seeking redress, as content moderation policies, data privacy law, and law enforcement cooperation vary widely across the transnational networks involved. The same digital globalization that has expanded women's access to information, markets, and solidarity networks has therefore also created new vectors for abuse, including the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, deepfake pornography, and coordinated harassment of women in public life, journalism, and politics. At the same time, digital connectivity has been essential to transnational feminist organizing, enabling survivors and activists across different countries to share information, document abuse, and pressure governments and corporations through globally visible campaigns. This dual character of digital globalization, simultaneously enabling new forms of harm and new forms of resistance, mirrors the broader pattern identified by feminist globalization scholars: global interconnection does not have a single, predetermined effect on gender relations but instead intensifies existing struggles over power, visibility, and accountability (True, 2012).

Global Governance and Transnational Feminist Advocacy

If globalization has created new structural conditions for gender violence, it has also generated new institutional and social resources for combating it. International instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women have established global normative benchmarks against which national policy can be measured, even where enforcement mechanisms remain weak. Comparative research by Htun and Weldon (2012) examined policy responses to violence against women across seventy countries between 1975 and 2005

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and found that the single strongest predictor of progressive national policy change was the strength and autonomy of domestic feminist movements, rather than a country's overall level of economic development or left-wing government. This finding is significant because it suggests that globalization's influence on gender violence policy operates less through the direct diffusion of international law and more through the way transnational feminist networks strengthen, connect, and legitimate local movements, which in turn drive national policy reform (Htun & Weldon, 2012). Global feminist advocacy networks have used international forums, from UN conferences to global campaigns such as Orange the World and #MeToo, to build cross-border solidarity, share strategies, and hold both governments and multinational corporations accountable. Merry's (2006) concept of vernacularization is again instructive here: successful advocacy is rarely a matter of simply importing global norms wholesale, but of translating them into locally resonant terms that can mobilize domestic constituencies and withstand backlash from entrenched patriarchal interests. This suggests that the globalization of feminist advocacy is most effective not when it bypasses local context, but when it strengthens the capacity of local actors to define and pursue their own agendas within a broader global framework of accountability.

Regional Illustrations

The uneven effects of globalization on gender violence are visible across diverse regional contexts. In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the rapid growth of export-processing maquiladora industries drew large numbers of young women into the urban workforce, a demographic shift that coincided with a well-documented wave of femicides that drew sustained international attention and cross-border activism (True, 2012). In Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South and Southeast Asia, structural adjustment programs and integration into global agricultural and garment supply chains have reshaped household economies in ways that have been linked, in some contexts, to both reductions in certain forms of violence, where women's independent income improves their bargaining power, and increases in others, where male status anxiety intensifies conflict (True, 2012). Conflict zones in the Great Lakes region of Africa illustrate the intersection of globalized resource extraction and wartime sexual violence, where control over minerals destined for global electronics supply chains has been financially linked to armed group activity implicated in mass sexual violence (True, 2012). These regional patterns underscore that globalization does not produce a single, uniform trajectory of gender violence; rather, its effects are mediated by local institutions, the strength of domestic women's movements, and the specific way each region is integrated into global economic and security structures.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Translating this analysis into practice requires policy responses that match the transnational scale of the problem without abandoning attention to local context. At the international level, this means strengthening enforcement mechanisms attached to existing instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, so that global normative commitments carry meaningful consequences for non-compliance rather than functioning as largely symbolic benchmarks. At the level of global economic governance, labor standards attached to trade agreements and corporate supply-chain accountability requirements can help close the regulatory gaps that leave migrant workers and export-zone laborers exposed to abuse, particularly when such standards include independent monitoring mechanisms rather than relying solely on self-reporting by the corporations involved (True, 2012). In the digital domain, cross-border cooperation among governments and platform companies is needed to ensure that technology-facilitated abuse cannot simply migrate to whichever jurisdiction offers the least regulatory friction, an approach that mirrors existing frameworks for cross-border cooperation on cybercrime more broadly. Perhaps

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most importantly, the comparative evidence assembled by Htun and Weldon (2012) suggests that international donors and institutions seeking to reduce gender violence should prioritize sustained funding and political support for autonomous domestic women's movements rather than channelling resources primarily through state bureaucracies or short-term programmatic interventions, since it is the strength and independence of these movements, not simply the presence of formal legal reform, that has proven most consistently associated with durable policy change. Post-conflict and humanitarian settings present a related lesson: reconstruction funding and peacebuilding programs are more likely to produce lasting protections for women when local women's organizations are given a substantive role in shaping reconstruction priorities from the outset, rather than being consulted only after major institutional and economic frameworks have already been set (True, 2012). Taken together, these implications point toward a layered strategy in which global norms, transnational corporate accountability, and sustained investment in local feminist organizing reinforce rather than substitute for one another.

Critiques and Limitations of the Globalization Framework

The globalization framework for understanding gender violence is not without its critics. Some scholars caution against overstating the novelty of globalization's effects, noting that colonial economic integration, transnational slavery, and cross-border conflict have shaped gendered violence for centuries, long before the term globalization entered common use. Others warn that a structural, macro-level focus on global economic forces risks understating individual agency, cultural specificity, and the diversity of women's own accounts of their experiences, potentially reproducing a homogenizing narrative in which women in the Global South are cast primarily as victims of global forces rather than as agents of change. There is also an ongoing debate about the direction of causality: while economic integration is frequently associated with shifts in gender violence, researchers caution that correlation between globalization indicators and violence rates does not establish a single causal mechanism, since domestic political institutions, cultural norms, and historical legacies mediate how global pressures are experienced locally (Htun & Weldon, 2012). Finally, critics note that international human rights frameworks, however well-intentioned, can themselves become instruments of selective global attention, in which some forms of gender violence receive extensive international scrutiny while others, often those affecting the most marginalized or geopolitically peripheral populations, remain comparatively invisible. These critiques do not invalidate the globalization framework but suggest that it must be applied with attention to historical context, local agency, and the uneven distribution of global attention itself.

Conclusion

Gender violence in the age of globalization is shaped by an interlocking set of economic, military, digital, and institutional forces that operate simultaneously across local and global scales. Economic restructuring and labor migration have created new vulnerabilities for women even as they have opened new forms of independence; globalized conflict economies have transformed the strategic uses of sexual violence; digital connectivity has produced both new forms of technology-facilitated abuse and new platforms for survivor solidarity; and transnational feminist advocacy has proven capable of translating global norms into locally meaningful policy change, provided that domestic movements retain the autonomy to shape their own agendas. What emerges from this analysis is not a single global mechanism producing gender violence, but a set of overlapping global processes that interact with local histories, institutions, and social movements in ways that produce highly uneven outcomes across different regions and communities. This unevenness is itself an important finding: it means that policy responses imported wholesale from one context to another, without

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regard for local political economy or the strength of existing women's organizations, are unlikely to succeed, however well they may have performed elsewhere. Addressing gender violence effectively in this context requires strategies that operate at multiple scales at once: strengthening international legal accountability, regulating the transnational corporations and digital platforms that mediate much of contemporary economic and social life, and, most importantly, investing in the autonomy and capacity of local and national women's movements, whose sustained organizing remains the most reliable predictor of meaningful policy change (Htun & Weldon, 2012). Globalization has not created a single global pattern of gender violence, but it has made clear that no strategy confined to a single nation-state can fully address a problem whose causes and consequences now span the globe.

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