

Reimagining AI for Gender-Based Violence through Care: Environmental Costs, Feminist Design Futures, and Safety Technologies

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Abstract

AI for gender-based violence (AI4GBV) is increasingly positioned as ‘good’ use of AI to address societal issues but overlooks environmental impact and material costs of data-intensive systems. This paper analyses these technologies through three online co-design workshops with 30 women in the United Kingdom, where participants critically assessed and reimagined AI-enabled safety technologies developed to tackle gender-based violence as part of “AI for Good”. Focusing on environmental responsibility, it asks what happens when AI4GBV is built on environmentally extractive infrastructures, who bears the costs of these infrastructures, and how women’s imaginaries grounded in feminist principles sketch alternatives. It presents three design provocations: 1) data extraction is environmental extraction, 2) scaling safety scales environmental and social harms, and 3) safety does not require high-tech solutions. Grounded in women’s visions, the provocations contrast AI for Good narratives built on norms of scale, efficiency, and technological solutionism, with sufficiency, low-tech solutions, and collective infrastructures. By mobilising care as a critical and design-oriented lens, this paper contributes to data ecofeminist perspectives in HCI, showing how environmental costs, gendered labour, and data practices are entangled. Ultimately, it positions women’s lived experiences as counter-stories to dominant AI narratives, contributing to discourses on environmentally responsible AI.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Women**.

Keywords

data ecofeminism, sociotechnical imaginaries, AI for good, gender-based violence, safety technologies

1 Introduction

AI for Good has been on the rise for years, promising ‘good’ use of AI to advance societal needs [21]. While framed as ethical and responsible interventions, they often ignore the environmental impact, its materiality, and the often-called ‘hidden’ costs of building data infrastructures [1, 59]. AI for gender-based violence, also dubbed AI4GBV, is signalling a technological but also epistemological shift in how societal problems are tackled [52]. Examples include AI chatbots for survivors of violence [40, 41], automated wearables ‘protecting’ women from violence [11, 30, 31, 46], CCTV for more efficient tracking [12, 24, 39, 42], using data analytics for predicting crime spots [5, 14, 27], law enforcement that aims to

use algorithms to predict perpetrators [15], and even drones are mentioned for automated solutions for women’s safety [45]. The United Nations welcomes ideas that use AI as an innovative and large-scale solution for the rise of gender-based violence, while at the same time acknowledging the threat of AI for women and girls and the perpetuation of violence [56]. While promising to do good, those interventions do not mention the ecological costs of building and sustaining the infrastructure upon which they are implemented: clouds and data servers. This paper asks what the environmental costs of AI for Good are and how they could be imagined otherwise. It focuses on the empirical case of data-driven and AI-enabled safety technologies (i.e., chatbots, reporting platforms, and emergency apps and wearables) that are developed globally as interventions for gender-based violence [4]. Those technologies collect intimate and sensitive data, try to make automated decisions about women’s safety, and shape policies around violence against women and girls. They provide an empirical case of how gender and environmental justice are intertwined, foregrounding care as a lens to imagine those infrastructures so that they benefit those most affected by inequalities and enable systemic change.

2 Aims, Objectives, and Contributions

This paper builds on three co-design workshops focused on AI-enabled safety technologies in which women reimagined technologies and AI futures based on feminist principles. The paper asks: *How can care as a lens reconfigure AI for Good in the context of gender-based violence in relation to environmental costs, and what alternative sociotechnical imaginaries and design orientations does it enable?* This paper focuses on the environmental costs of AI4GBV and advances empirically grounded design provocations on extraction, scale, and solutionism that extend data ecofeminism through design research and feminist STS work of care and environmentalism. It focuses on women as active data producers and workers, their lived experience of everyday violence and harassment, and their speculations and imaginations as vital entry points into alternatives.

3 Related Work

The next subsections briefly situate the empirical case of AI4GBV within the theoretical literature on sociotechnical imaginaries and gender-based violence, data feminism and data ecofeminism, feminist HCI and care.

3.1 Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Safety Technologies

Safety technologies have evolved from basic alarms to sophisticated AI-driven systems designed to address violence against women. These technologies are part of a broader shift towards ‘technologies of sexual governance’ [50] and ‘anti-rape technologies’ [49], which are increasingly integrated with data analytics and machine learning to enhance their effectiveness. Despite these advancements, there remains a significant gap in exploring the ethical and sociotechnical implications of these data-driven technologies. Jasanoff and Kim’s framework of ‘sociotechnical imaginaries’ [32] as collectively held visions of desirable futures shaped by technologies builds the foundation for most research on safety technologies [47, 51] and currently enters HCI for imaginations for safety and safe spaces in relation to gender-based violence for responsible design [58]. Those imaginaries are criticised as producers of victimhood, reinforcing patriarchal norms of surveillance and control as well as neutralisers of rape myths [48, 49, 51].

Building on this, I argue that the imaginaries that AI brings into this, within AI4GBV, are shaped by an imaginary of automated protection and prediction. Safety here is imagined as data-driven and efficient, predicting crime before it happens. Yet it increases surveillance, tracking, and automated decision-making based on biased datasets of under-reported domestic violence cases. Research on so-called gender-based violence chatbots, especially for domestic abuse survivors, highlights potential benefits, i.e., access, anonymity, as well as immediacy [8, 10, 40, 41]. Yet other studies show sociotechnical constraints and opportunities of abusing the very structures that aim to protect women by inappropriate responses in the GBV context [28, 29], especially algorithmic bias and risks of tech-mediated abuse [10]. The environmental costs of those technologies remain largely absent in the literature, and only touch on the impact on city architectures [34, 35].

3.2 Data Feminism and Data Ecofeminism

D’Ignazio and Klein [19] argue that technological fixes often reproduce systems of oppression that cannot be solved by collecting vast amounts of data, as that data is representative of unequal societal structures shaped by racism and sexism. Hence, it has to be uncovered who gets represented by the data, who benefits, and who is rendered invisible, and how those data structures resonate and maintain power structures. Feminism can be used to confront AI to unearth its norms and values [9, 36]. Data, important for even having AI systems, can be a force for worse, but can be used as D’Ignazio shows as an amplifier and visibiliser of gendered inequalities [16, 17], confronting and dismantling power relations.

Data ecofeminism [57] extends this by looking into the materiality of data infrastructures. The cloud often obscures the materiality of those, as AI systems rely on infrastructure, cables, mineral extraction, digital rubbish, data centers, and global supply chains [5,25,26]. The environmental harms are unevenly distributed, often affecting those who are already the most vulnerable [20]. Feminist STS echoes environmentalism, emphasising the material impact of data practices, as something produced through infrastructures, often gendered and racialised labour, and embodied experiences [33]. Data ecofeminism links a domination of women and nature

across capitalist accumulation; it introduces ideas of slow tech, de-growth, non-extractivism, and planetary accountability. AI4GBV is not framed as something with environmental costs, as safety is imagined as morally urgent, often exempt from criticism. This paper dialogues data ecofeminism with HCI in practice under the paradigm of environmentalism and tech [22, 23].

3.3 Feminist HCI/STS and Care

Feminist HCI as a tradition forwards the meaning of lived experience for design, challenging dominant norms and power structures [6]. The latest turns in it outline the importance of dialoguing feminist social science and HCI as a method to unearth the lived experiences of marginalised people [7]. It challenges solutionist design and asks questions mirroring principles of data ecofeminism; design here is always political and never neutral, and the data on which those technologies are built, and decisions are made, are intertwined with design principles of how data is made visible and accountable. It investigates who actually benefits from technological design and who bears the cost. Here, STS and design meet by moving beyond usability towards design justice. Thinking with feminism cannot be done without thinking with care [38, 44]. Care is relational and interdependent; it is also asymmetrical and deeply entrenched in power relations; it is human, relational, and empathetic [2, 3, 54, 55]. Thus, HCI, CSCW, and feminist STS have forwarded care as a lens and tradition to unearth the dominant norms and values of patriarchal society [13, 43, 53]. Following feminist STS, care is a way of knowledge production that foregrounds relationality, mess, and situated concerns [2, 3, 33, 37]. It challenges extractive and solutionist logics of AI development.

4 Method

This paper is part of a broader PhD project on data-driven and AI-enabled technologies for women’s safety and AI for Good paradigms. I based the workshop design on feminist qualitative traditions [18, 25, 26] and STS notions of care-ful sensibilities in value entanglements and iterative processes rather than extracting stable data [37]. I conducted three online three-hour-long co-design workshops with Katherine Zhou as a workshop facilitator in 2025. We focused the workshops on the role of data and AI in the technologies developed to tackle gender-based violence. We introduced safety technology as a typology of genAI chatbots, reporting platforms, emergency apps, and wearables with screenshots of real-life applications and user interfaces. We structured the workshops along the following activities: 1) *tech criticism* on safety technologies, 2) *safety perceptions and practices* in relation to technologies, 3) *feminist redesigns* of safety technologies, 4) *safety work and data power*, and 5) *speculative AI futures*. All workshops were recorded, informed consent was collected before the workshop, demographic information was collected via a short voluntary survey, in total, 30 women participated (mostly cis-women, mixed ethnicities, safety app users and non-users, researchers, practitioners, and students with knowledge in AI), and each workshop had 8-11 participants, excluding facilitators. For this workshop paper, data has been revisited through an environmental lens examining how insights resonate with data ecofeminist principles. Ethics were approved by the University of Cambridge.

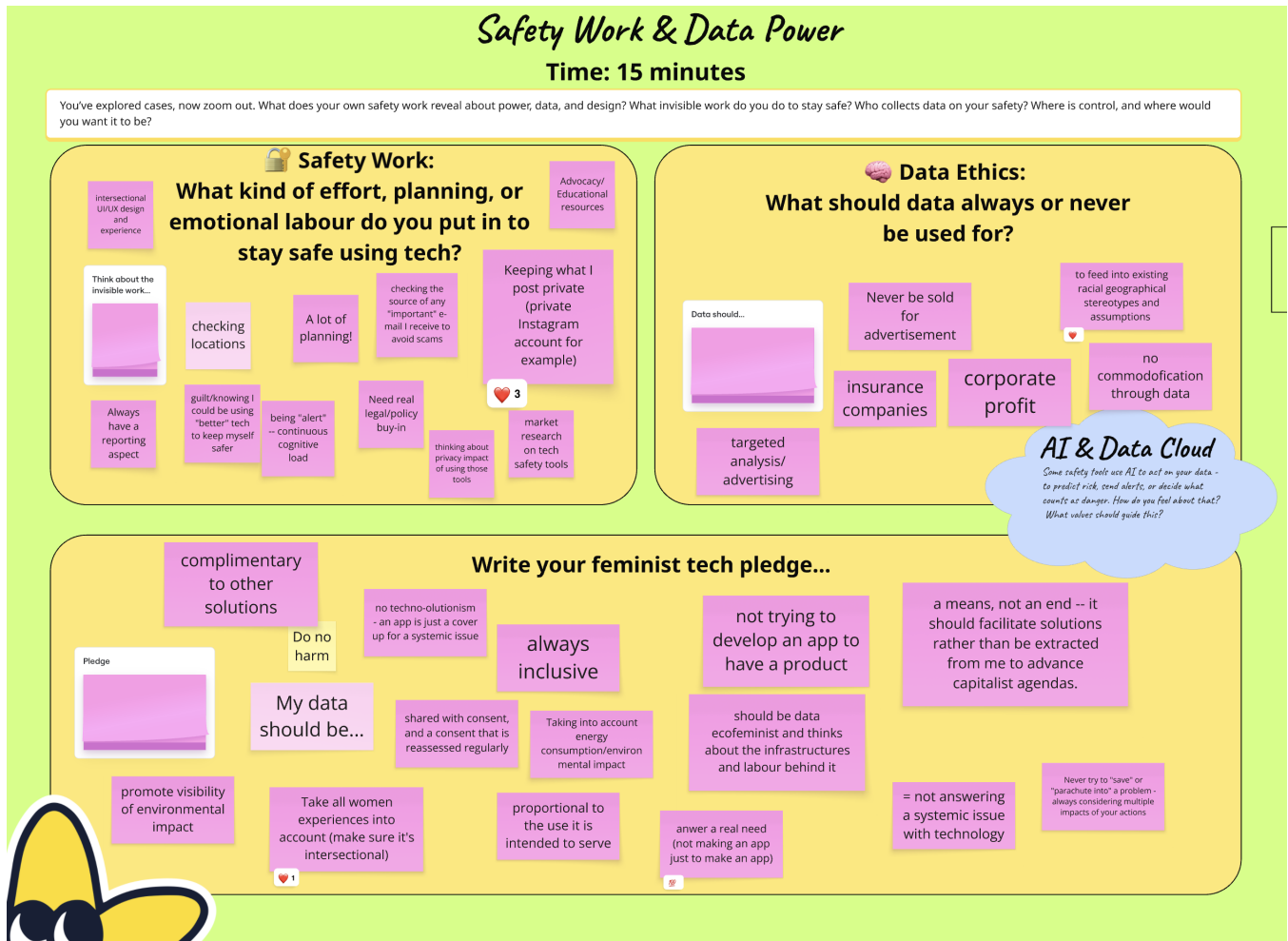


Figure 1: Miro board on data power.

5 Three Provocations: "Promote Visibility of Environmental Impact"

Based on the three co-design workshops and the call for papers, I outline three provocations of extraction, scale, and technological solutionism. These provocations i) challenge dominant dialogues on AI for Good, ii) make the environmental footprint of these technologies visible when thinking with, by, and through care, and iii) provide design orientations for environmentally responsible AI. The three tensions are derived from workshop participants sticky notes and interactions in the three co-design workshops (see Figures 1 and 2).

- **Extraction: Data extraction is environmental extraction.** All women were worried that technologies are built on their data work. Most identified that tools were extractive and used their data for decision-making without crediting their work, and without a feedback loop that clearly outlines what is done with data, how it is reused, and how it might impact policies. Using data without feedback is extractive,

using women as a resource. This extractive logic brings visibility to how continuous data capture needs energy and relies on data-intensive infrastructures. Hence, design must show how data collection, storage, and sharing produce environmental costs, introducing ideas of data stewardship.

- **Scale: Scaling safety scales harms.** Women were sceptical about whether AI can do any good in situations of gender-based violence, as support needs to be situational, contextual, and empathetic. While, for example, genAI chatbots can deliver easier access and lower barriers to sharing vulnerable experiences, they questioned thresholds of chatbot data privacy and how their data could be kept safe when it is used as (i) training data and (ii) often runs on interfaces such as Telegram or WhatsApp. Scaling multiplies technological infrastructures, such as increased CCTV and databases for GBV, and the energy needs of servers and clouds. Scaling systems multiplies environmental footprint, making scale materially costly. Because of that, design should resist scale

of whom and how, and how those data infrastructures are built and integrated into the everyday life of women and can hurt those who rely on those technologies. Analysing AI4GBV through women's lived experiences, the paper shows how safety technologies rely on extractive data practices, can reproduce inequalities, and externalise environmental costs in tech development, deployment, and maintenance. While women do uncredited 'digital safety work', producing data as well as sustaining platforms that are energy-intensive, those technologies, in the end, raise the question of whether they mitigate violence or primarily redistribute harms and costs, such as environmental consequences to those already marginalised. Feminist design futures highlight the need to move beyond optimisation and to refocus on existing communities and infrastructures, environmental responsibility and care-ful considerations of AI's impact beyond increases in efficiency and productivity.

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