

E commerce, Future of labor and its impact on women

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Introducción

Discussions on the future of work sometimes revolve around elaborate issues regarding how the world will or will not look like a few years ahead. Predictions worth of fortune tellers and futurologists¹ are floated about how we will lose our jobs or on the influence technology will have on our lives. The fact remains that the only thing that economics can assert with certainty is, as John Keynes said, that “in the long run we will all be dead”². This is truly scientific and objective to the core. But leaving aside fatalism, let us focus on facts and arguments, not about the future but about the present of work.

The transformations that we have been living for several decades in the production processes, managed to generate new labor paradigms that, in my opinion, we can divide into three large groups:

- ✓ **The entrepreneurial paradigm:** companies have managed to generate a new type of outsourced worker, the entrepreneur. Changes the capital / work relationship, since he is not an employee of the company, but a "client". The speech sounds attractive to many, where the demands that capitalism was able to impose on workers, will make it increasingly incompatible to sustain a sustainable private and working life in the long term. The idea of working from home became sexy for many, achieving the dismemberment of production in small units. The technology was not 100% responsible for this. In fact, today there are entrepreneurial workers in the most diverse areas, such as textiles: where there used to be large clothing manufacturing buildings, today we see isolated workshops that deliver production weekly and work in groups of no more than

¹ <https://www.quora.com/Will-a-fourth-industrial-revolution-cause-us-to-lose-our-jobs-or-make-us-richer>

<http://blogs.worldbank.org/psd/energy/future-jobs-and-fourth-industrial-revolution-business-usual-unusual-business>

<https://www.weforum.org/press/2016/01/five-million-jobs-by-2020-the-real-challenge-of-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/>

² https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Maynard_Keynes

3 or 4 people in the garage of a house. The entrepreneur has only one comfort, and that is to be able to stay in his home, but he does not enjoy any benefit for his work beyond the salary, since the companies demand limited deadlines, without holidays, sick leave, medical insurance, retirement or bonus. Within this category are platform workers, an increasingly growing sector in the economy. One automatically thinks of Mercado Libre, Amazon or Ebay, but the truth is that platforms of the most diverse are created every day, from educational, or various services such as UBER and Airbnb, to platforms of lawyers, translators, language courses, graphic design and all that we can imagine. Companies generate platforms to bring markets closer together and outsource employment in an increasingly dynamic capitalism.

- ✓ **The worker affected by the technology.** The second subgroup is the jobs that are going to be replaced or modified by artificial intelligence. We find to a large extent jobs that are destroyed daily and replaced by machines, with the consequent creation of new repair posts, design, maintenance and systematization of data generated by these machines. These employees who must adapt to the new reality suffer a double impact: on the one hand they are left without work, but on the other they find many difficulties of reintegration in the market since they find that new jobs require special skills adopted. Thus, they end up focusing on the services sector, and above all on platform jobs, in order to find a quick solution to the unemployment drama, being very expensive to receive the necessary training to readjust and re-enter the job market in higher-qualified positions.³
- ✓ Finally, **there are the digitally excluded**, those people who do not have the possibility to readjust and reintegrate or to acquire skills for a platform job. The digitally excluded are part of a sector that lives predominantly in the global South, where the number of people who do not have access to technology is greater. On the other hand there are those who have access to it, but do not have good service: that is, it will be very difficult to compete on a platform against other vendors if my Internet connection is limited or I suffer repeated power outages. Once again, developing countries are the most affected by this reality.

All this transformation is largely a product of technology and the demands of today's economy. But governments have the ability to regulate changes so that they do not mean precarious

³ http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_370408.pdf

employment. This capacity can be decimated by a commercial negotiation that is currently found in many free trade agreements such as the TISA⁴ and the TPP and various bilateral agreements, as well as a working group in the World Trade Organization itself, the "friends of commerce for development"⁵.

What can women expect from the changes that take place in the labor market and in the economy in general? Is there a new window of opportunity? Or is it simply more of the same? We go in parts taking the path to reflection.

¿Qué podemos esperar las mujeres de los cambios que se gestan en el mercado de trabajo y en la economía en general? ¿Se presenta una nueva ventana de oportunidad? ¿O simplemente es más de lo mismo? Vamos por partes tomando el camino a la reflexión.

What is e-commerce and how does it shape the economy?

For those not yet acquainted with this issue, let us first say that e-commerce is much more than buying and selling internationally through the internet. The rules that are currently being negotiated at the global level in order to “regulate” (or rather deregulate) economic exchanges through the internet can be summarized in five main points:

1. No commercial presence requirements for companies operating through internet
2. No technology transfer requirements as a condition to operate
3. No obligations for companies to abide by the decisions of local courts regarding consumer rights and protections
4. No obligations to pay taxes for data transfers
5. No access to or localization requirements for data in the country where it is collected⁶

These five points we can find them in diverse international agreements on services and e-commerce and they were part of the proposes raised in the last Ministerial Meeting of the WTO

⁴ <https://wikileaks.org/tisa/>

⁵ https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/ecom_e/ecomdevel_e.htm
<http://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=1477>

⁶ https://wikileaks.org/tisa/document/20151001_Annex-on-Electronic-Commerce/

in Buenos Aires⁷. Capital's future is cast on these points, and so is therefore the future of business and work, with the emergence of companies that operate through the worldwide web, in remote locations, tapping on each nation's comparative advantages, with no accountability whatsoever –whether to consumers (given that they operate outside of the jurisdiction of consumer protection laws), workers (since these companies have no commercial presence) or the general citizenry (owing to the fact that they do not transfer technology nor pay taxes, as they are allowed to legally establish themselves in tax havens). It is worth noting that with the emergence of the 'internet of things', an ever-increasing number of goods are now considered 'services' in terms of international trade, and could hence potentially be covered by these rules. Since the inception of home appliances such as the smart fridge with wi-fi, a growing number of goods now carry internet. It is therefore easy to envision that, in the long run, if these set of rules are adopted by institutions such as the WTO or free trade agreements, all companies will fall under the scope of these 5 rules, whether they are web portals or not.

Under these rules, a new paradigm worker is established, the 'entrepreneur' worker that merely uses operational platforms to secure some income for himself and his family, as an internet services portals customer. Also consumers are every day more dependent of technology and the comfort it brings, giving away for free to corporations the economy's new Potosi gold: data.⁸

Data. What for?

Shivers take hold of our bodies at times, when we become aware of the vast amount of things Google knows about ourselves. After having visited a store, it often happens that we get notifications on our smartphones begging us to rate our experience in the store, to post pictures and videos of the place we have visited. This is merely a very small example of the amount of private data held and managed by corporations, which they take enormous pains to withhold. The reasons for such a heated interest are three:

1. Segmented advertising

⁷ https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/FE_Search/FE_S_S009-DP.aspx?language=E&CatalogueIdList=243191,243201,239609,237305,237306,234444,232130,230236,230146,230135&CurrentCatalogueIdIndex=4&FullTextHash=&HasEnglishRecord=True&HasFrenchRecord=True&HasSpanishRecord=True

⁸ <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/05/06/the-worlds-most-valuable-resource-is-no-longer-oil-but-data>

2. Algorithms economics
3. Artificial intelligence

The fact is that corporations are demanding rules at the WTO and other international agreements such as TISA that will enable transnational corporations to take ownership of that data, while countries lose jurisdiction over it without even being able to request access to it in case of need. Companies refuse to pay for the data, even though it is them using and managing it. But if data is given away for free, one could arguably say it is not a trade issue, and that a regulatory body would thus be needed, possibly within the United Nations system, to regulate transfers, storage and access to data worldwide. This is not happening, because corporations know very well that if such were the case, States would need to be involved in the regulatory process in non secret negotiations, and civil society could lobby those discussions and would hence preserve their sovereignty over and access to data. Corporations are therefore bringing these issues into trade agreements instead, revealing capitalism's mean face: the indiscriminate plunder of rough materials from the global South to the global North. Indeed, if these issues are labelled as trade issues, there will be payment for the data we give freely away through the worldwide web, but the reality is otherwise.

Let us now return to the objective and start looking into the consequences that this whole process has on women.

Feminism and big data

When this agenda first got to be negotiated in international trade agreements, some experts were heard asserting that **the e-commerce agenda would impact positively on the gender gap**, and that the mere act of adopting them would benefit women worldwide⁹. In fact, working groups on gender and electronic commerce have been established both at the World Trade Organization and UNCTAD.¹⁰ Those initiatives have been rejected by women organizations in

⁹ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/5/speech-ded-puri-e-commerce-panel-discussion>
http://www.ijcst.org/Volume2/Issue8/p13_2_8.pdf

<https://www.accenture.com/us-en/gender-equality-research-2016>

¹⁰ <http://unctad.org/en/pages/MeetingDetails.aspx?meetingid=1322>

several opportunities and there are 221 feminist organizations against using the “gender excuse” to push forward the e commerce agenda, among other, in the WTO.¹¹

A strong claim accepted by many is that women will benefit from these new forms of remote or entrepreneurial labor because they will be able to work from home without leaving household chores unattended, thus helping them articulate their professional work and maternity. It goes without saying that caring for the household should be a shared task of both mothers and fathers, and this whole idea merely entrenches further the role of women in society as has been traditionally taken for granted. Let us not fool ourselves, the truth is that the internet has indeed opened a world of opportunities for us and that remote work is today of great help to many people, not only household heads but also people with mobility problems and various health conditions. Though there is likewise no doubt that **this opportunity should not be regarded as a big leap forward for the female gender**, because we can then work from home, but rather as an opportunity for anyone that needs it.

Also this argument says that e commerce is gender neutral, and that it does not matter who is behind the computer selling or delivering a service. Payment is equal for everybody, and thus it is a powerfull tool to reduce the pay gap between men and women.

It is claimed additionally that the automation of jobs will ultimately benefit women worldwide because care service jobs, where workers are predominantly women, are most difficult to replace with machines¹². So it should be expected that they will be the least adversely affected by the labor readjustments that this change in the production to new technological means demands. This claim once again reinforces the role women have been apportioned in society, giving them furthermore a false ‘sensation of happiness’ in the face of increasing labor flexibilization and the transformation of production.

To understand the impact these rules will have on the gender gap if adopted in their current format, let us first analyze the three main aforementioned areas of corporate interest in the management of data.

¹¹ <http://apwld.org/press-release-164-womens-rights-groups-call-on-governments-to-reject-the-wto-declaration-on-womens-economic-empowerment/>

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/2010/07/19/job-market-growing-industries-employment-forbes-woman-leadership-most-secure-jobs.html#7b3a78146d1b>

- ✓ **Advertising and information.** Companies want our data to be able to send us the segmented information that we are interested about. That is sometimes useful, but intrusive at times. It is a fact that women are usually doing the households shopping, whether of clothes, food, school materials and other household goods. This reality is currently changing and more and more men are engaging with these tasks, although it is still predominantly a women-dominated market. Truth is that women do on average a 76% more of the household chores with no payment at all, and they spend 5 hours a day on them¹³. Since women spend more time looking for online sales and shopping, it should not fall as something strange that advertisements land directly on their email boxes, their Facebook pages or their search engines, further reinforcing the idea that this is a women's task. It will be difficult for men to engage in the new emerging household dynamics if they do not get advertisements and their new emerging role is not facilitated, nor the idea reinforced that household chores can be done by anyone regardless of gender.
- ✓ **Algorithms economics.** Companies seek to hold data to generate algorithms. These algorithms are nothing more than equations that explain, optimize and predict human behavior, on the basis of the information stored in big data bases. Algorithms generated on the basis of big data are now replacing entire production processes. These algorithms are not prepared for social changes, since they are developed on the basis of past time information, they merely reinforce and repeat humanity's history. Web based human resources search engines are a good example of how these algorithms can actually further expand the gender gap. Companies are already replacing their human resources departments for algorithms, specifying that they will only hire people that have been successful in their work. So the simple parameter they use to define successful is "any employee that has worked at least three years in a company and that has been promoted at least once during that time". If the algorithm would capture the profiles of those that fulfill such conditions, those people would most likely be white men, 25-35 years old and with higher-level education. Women, people with disabilities and from ethnic and sexual minority groups would most likely fall outside of the parametric, given that they are victims of discrimination, violence and labor harassment, and under the pressure of having to take responsibility for domestic and household labors. **In short,**

¹³ <http://economiafeminita.com/recursos/>

the algorithm merely replicates the history of gender violence and reproduces it. It is not capable of transcending it. ¹⁴

- ✓ **Artificial intelligence and the internet of things.** An increasing number of appliances are now equipped to operate autonomously or remotely on the basis of information we give them. From the vacuum cleaner that sweeps the house by itself to a ring-bell with inbuilt camera that can be answered from the cellphone, more and more things are currently digitalized and we are moving towards an economy based on artificial intelligence that will facilitate many of our daily life routines. **The question that is often raised when we see all these modern appliances is who controls them,** who gives them the information that allows them to operate? If the fridge runs out of milk, who does it alert of that fact? If the household needs to be vacuum cleaned, who is programming the time at which that will be done by the machine? If bread needs to be baked for tomorrow, who prepares the bread baking machine? Obviously, this is not directly a technological concern, but it does have to do with the way products “that facilitate the housewives’ life” ¹⁵ are advertised. If the appliance sends the information to the woman because it was programmed that way, the man will never know that there was no milk in the fridge, nor that the vacuum cleaner stopped working, or that the ring bell sounded and needs to be answered. More than a critic, this paragraph intends to caution on how we use these technologies so that they do not end up being an additional weight on women’s daily lives, having to withstand permanent interruptions in their workday from notifications that reinforce and overload them with additional household responsibilities. Of course its not the technology to blame if this overflow of information goes towards women, but yet again it is a counterargument to the premise that e commerce rules will benefit to reduce the gender gap per se. It is as ridiculous as to say that the only existence of a washing machine has done the same. If the washing machine it is set by a woman, then the situation did not change at all.

The labor of the future

¹⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/cathy_o_neil_the_era_of_blind_faith_in_big_data_must_end#t-100246

https://www.ted.com/talks/tricia_wang_the_human_insights_missing_from_big_data

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgLKYmWp8Aw>

Currently, and as explained in the introduction, we can divide the jobs of the future into three broad categories.

- ✓ New jobs affected by technology
- ✓ The "entrepreneurs" and platforms workers, outsourced
- ✓ The digitally excluded

These three categories are very diverse and each has its own characteristics. The truth is that the companies of the future, through the rules of electronic commerce, form a new productive framework where they no longer own the stock of products, they do not have employees or commercial offices. More and more the paradigm is the company that outsources everything and the workers that produce are disguised under the name of "clients" or "entrepreneurs". This is the case of traditional sectors of the economy as well as the most modern jobs. These modern jobs, it is said, are positive to close the gender gap because the platform does not care if you are male or female. The pay is closely linked to the level of effort put by the entrepreneur worker being this system neutral to the issue of gender, where we see that men earn on average between 15 and 25% more depending on the country¹⁶.

Is it true that a web worker earns the same regardless of gender? No. It's not like that. Simply because the algorithms are demanding with workers who are forced to devote themselves 7 days a week, 24 hours a day to have availability for the platform in order not to have negative ratings, and these end up being detrimental to their reputation, and therefore at your level of sale¹⁷. Nowadays, the platform workers' qualification systems are imposed by multinational companies, where each time the buyer has less degrees of freedom to qualify and increasingly there is an automatic system that measures whether the seller met the imposed standard. Women undoubtedly suffer more in this aspect, when on average, we continue to take care of domestic work, taking the children to the doctor, making purchases, cleaning and attending to emotional and family care demands. The algorithm does not take into account whether or not you had a sick child, or if you had to go out and do the shopping. Your requirements must be met at the time and day the client wants. Therefore, it would be expected that women obtain

¹⁶ <http://economiafeminita.com/recursos/>

http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/maps-and-charts/enhanced/WCMS_458201/lang--en/index.htm

¹⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/88fdc58e-754f-11e6-b60a-de4532d5ea35>

<http://www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-your-future-boss-a-computer-algorithm-it-s-closer-than-you-think-20151005-story.html>

less income from remote work than men. The algorithm imposes rules, is the new employer. From how to make a shipment, to how to respond to a message or make a publication, everything, absolutely everything is parameterized by the platform and the algorithm automatically judges the work performance based on the imposed standards.

What about treatment? What happens with the increasingly notorious violence that circulates on the web? Women are discriminated against daily, violated, insulted and mistreated in all social networks. On Twitter, a great campaign has been mounted around this with the #toxictwitter¹⁸. Is that there are violent people everywhere, but on the web, for whatever reason (probably because they do not have to face the victim directly) the violence is even greater¹⁹. Workers who sell their ideas on Facebook have negative comments every day for the photos they post, the things they say, or the type of work they do. This violence to which women are accustomed, we see it happen and we internalize it, not without pain sometimes. Women are criticized for their physique, for their way of saying things, for the way they run their business and even for working, receiving the usual comment of "go wash the dishes"²⁰.

The empowerment of women is not just about giving them tools to be what they want to be. The empowerment of women also implies a profound change as a society, where violent people are condemned by their comments and violent attitudes. Nowadays it is very difficult for a platform worker to negatively qualify a client. Not so in reverse.

Also, and even more controversial, it implies unequal rules that contemplate existing differences. There is no "digital neutrality". If the rules are the same for everyone, then they benefit the most powerful sector or those who have the greatest social advantages.

Just as we continue to demand the validity of special and differential treatment for developing countries in international trade rules in the World Trade Organization²¹, we should also be claiming algorithms in different platforms and remote forms of work that take into account this notorious overload on women: the balance biased in favor of the weak.

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/CarlosMazaVox/videos/788710384649899/>

¹⁹ http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/cyber_violence_gender%20report.pdf?v=1&d=20150924T154259

<http://eige.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/cyber-violence-growing-threat-especially-women-and-girls>

²⁰ <http://www.diariojudicial.com/nota/80258>

²¹ <https://www.globalpolicy.org/home/270-general/53030-letter-from-csos-about-the-agenda-of-the-wto-.html>

It is false to say that electronic commerce and technology in general are neutral. For the case a dish washer is also neutral. It can be turned on by anyone. But paradoxically, we are the women who, on average, take charge of starting it up. Ergo, if I want e-commerce to really empower women and reduce existing differences, I must impose unequal rules in favor of the most vulnerable, otherwise it will only replicate the differences existing in society.

Once again, the only way out is the responsibility of companies and the State to defend the work of women. To set standards that favor them, to promote public policies of awareness of the division of domestic work and to have access to source codes and algorithms designed by the platforms in order to know if they are discriminatory and / or "neutral". Meanwhile, the rules that benefit women the most it's the right and fair thing to demand so that they do not "throw the ladder" of labor development of women. If remote work through the internet is the future, let's start by demanding algorithms that have "special and differentiated treatment" towards minorities.

In turn, the growing participation of women in jobs related to technology causes a wave of optimism towards electronic commerce, looking for companies armed and driven by women around the world who have managed to be successful thanks to the tools offered Internet²². The truth is that approximately 60%²³ of women in developing countries ensure that having more flexible hours thanks to the opportunities offered by the Internet, has allowed or facilitated employment and reconciliation of personal and professional life. More and more women find an adequate job opportunity on the internet and join these channels. But is this a valid argument to boost the negotiation around electronic commerce? The reality is that the social transformation that we are seeing worldwide with the empowerment of women and the feminist movement demanding against violence, the wage gap and equal opportunities, has been incorporating women in a massive way into the labor market, not only on the web, but in all areas of work, politics, academics, and social²⁴. The gap is closing in all countries of the world, and in all sectors, with more and more women in the different areas of decision. Therefore it is very pretentious to award this kindness to electronic commerce: in fact, technology is one more vehicle that women found, the engine is global social change.

²² http://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/dtl_eWeek2018_summary_en.pdf página 28.

²³ https://www.accenture.com/t00010101T000000__w_/ar-es/_acnmedia/PDF-9/Accenture-Getting-To-Equal.pdf

²⁴ <http://closethegap.studiometric.co/>

Finally, we still have digitally excluded jobs that can not be replaced by technology. In this case, care jobs. The reality is that women who traditionally lead this sector will find fierce competition from men who try to enter this market massively in order to keep a job that does not require technological transformation. In fact you can already see male nurses, teachers, or babysitters²⁵. These traditionally female jobs probably will not be as such in the future. The reality is that the sector is booming with the growing life expectancy worldwide as a result of improved health, and some countries find little work force dedicated to care jobs, further enhancing the massive entry of men to this sector. Once again, we are not saying that this is wrong, or that we should not allow men to enter, but it throws away the argument that women will benefit from technological transformation by keeping our jobs in this sector that will grow and not will be replaced. In fact UNCTAD ensures²⁶ that where more highly qualified jobs are going to be created throughout the economy, it will be in those related to technology and telecommunications, where only 16% of workers are women, and the percentage does not seem rise over the years.

Conclusions

As you can see the debate is broad and the consequences of technological changes are not easy to see and analyze, but one thing is true: an unequal society is not going to solve gender problems magically overnight only by enjoy technological transformations. Social problems are not solved only by introducing new forms of production in society, but they replicate the realities that are already present in the economy. With this, what do we mean? It does not really imply this being against technology, under any circumstances. Once again, it is accepted that the incorporation of it opens a window of real opportunities for women, disabled people and minorities in general. What is certain is that this can not be used to promote international negotiations that only favor transnational corporations and do not take into account existing social asymmetries, achieving homogeneous rules for all. If the rules around technology and electronic commerce really wanted to empower women and promote development, those rules should be different for the privileged sectors and countries, vis a vis the most unprotected of society.

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/2017/sep/13/encourage-more-men-social-care-gender-nursing-career>

²⁶ http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ier2017_en.pdf página 26.

The empowerment of women and the increasing participation of women in web spaces and entrepreneurial jobs are due to the difficulty they have had in reconciling work and personal life. In the dream of achieving that both realities can coexist, women find in entrepreneurial work a difficult and hard opportunity. Genuine competition is only taking place thanks to the social transformation that feminism has managed to achieve and not thanks to the incorporation of technology per se. The debates around equality must continue to be so that technology does not do what it was programmed for: to reinforce inequality between men and women. A more fair society is necessary. Let us reprogram it with consciousness raising and debate.