

Project Evaluation

Re-wiring India's Digitalising Economy for Women's Rights and Well-being: An Action-oriented Knowledge Intervention

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Executive Summary

This report presents an independent evaluation of this project, undertaken by the Bangalore-based IT for Change (ITfC) in association with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and funded by the European Union (CFP no: EuropeAid/161522/DD/ACT/IN, Proposal No: CSO-LA/2019/161522/16).

The objectives of the evaluation were to

- i. Assess the extent to which the CSOs have been able to enhance the capabilities of the Social Enterprises to adopt digital technologies and tools that are gender responsive and integrate feminist principles.
- ii. Assess the strategies adopted through the project to build the field on gender and the digital economy at the national and global levels.

The evaluation sought to examine the **relevance, coherence, effectiveness, impact sustainability, and the efficient application of resources**. More specifically, we were interested in understanding the project through these guiding questions: What changed for the CSOs in terms of – (a) thinking about gender and technology, the place of technology in their frontline processes of the Social Enterprise, and the larger dynamics of women’s [work] lives. (b) What contributions to knowledge were made - by building a scholarly community around questions of gender, tech, & work, through direct research outputs, and through engagement with the public and policy discourse

Overall, the impression gained from the three CSOs was that ***the project allowed them the time to pause and reflect on their processes in a granular manner, bringing in a research approach that respected the organizations’ philosophy and goals, and acknowledging the field realities.***

Recognising the tacit and codified knowledges that the SEs bring to the table, and acknowledging their expertise and experience, is an important factor in forging a mutually supportive collaboration that values trust, transparency and openness, which in turn lead to more robust field-level analysis.

ITfC’s approach to start from where the CSOs were in their journey of technology adoption meant that they had to be responsive to the varied locations, experiences, and organisational objectives of the three Social Enterprises. The project adopted different approaches to first understanding the “Digital Enterprise Capabilities” of each, and then drew up a road map that was specific to the respective context, prior to evolving a Technodesign blueprint for each.

Structural factors and infrastructural access limit how and when technology can be deployed. In the context of the project, women’s relationship with technology for the purposes of work

was closely tied in with both the politics of work and the politics of gender. Another aspect of technology adoption is that it must contend with **time poverty**, which most women working in the informal sector experience.

The intellectual and material impact of the project is clearly documented in the many publications, strategy maps, and policy briefs that emerged from the field engagements and the meetings and conferences—particularly “Roots of Resilience” conference in Trivandrum in December 2023, which brought together knowledge partners, field level social enterprises, and state representatives to debate and discuss the possibility of worker rights in a platform economy.

We find through our evaluation that ITfC brought a valuable mix of intellectual rigour and field-facing pragmatism to the way in which the project was designed, implemented and documented.

I. Background

As India advances toward the Viksit Bharat Vision 2047, digital technology adoption will be central to shaping its economic growth, governance systems, and social development. However, India cannot become a truly “developed nation” if half its population remains excluded or disadvantaged by the technologies that define its future. When digital tools and apps are designed without a gender transformative approach, they risk reinforcing structural inequalities—undermining the goals of equity and dignity. The project “Re-wiring India’s Digitalising Economy for Women’s Rights and Well-being: An Action-oriented Knowledge Intervention” can offer insights into potential pathways to enable grassroots organisations working with marginalised communities, especially women, to adopt digital technologies.

This report presents an independent evaluation of this project, undertaken by the Bangalore-based IT for Change (ITfC) in association with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and funded by the European Union (CFP no: EuropeAid/161522/DD/ACT/IN, Proposal No: CSO-LA/2019/161522/16).

In this project, ITfC, which proposed and drove action with support from FES, engaged at the field level with three social enterprises in India supported by very different CSOs for whom digitalisation was seen, to varying extents, as inevitable yet challenging to promote women’s livelihoods: SEWA, Vrutti, and LabourNet. The project was approved in early 2020 and was implemented over a period of five years, from January 2020 till the end of 2025.

II. Objectives of the Evaluation:

The Project undertaken by ITfC with support from the European Commission (EC) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) was built on the premise that equipping social enterprises with actionable knowledge about the digital economy can enhance the participation of women in shaping the digital tools and in using them to advance their work and exercise greater agency to improve their livelihood opportunities. In the long term, this would strengthen the ability of these organisations to build inclusive, participant-informed, rights-based digital futures. Through this project, ITfC sought to bring to the fore a feminist narrative to inform policies on women’s digital economic participation.

The objectives of the evaluation were to

- iii. Assess the extent to which the CSOs have been able to enhance the capabilities of the Social Enterprises to adopt digital technologies and tools that are gender responsive and integrate feminist principles.

- iv. Assess the strategies adopted through the project to build the field on gender and the digital economy at the national and global levels.

Given the nature and the time frame available for the evaluation, the focus was on examining the stated achievements under the project and discerning the insights gained by the three social enterprises, specifically those resulting from their engagement with ITfC. The evaluation sought to examine the **relevance, coherence, effectiveness, impact and sustainability, and the efficient application of resources**¹ through the project period, along with a strong focus on understanding the project's ability to identify and address underlying barriers that impact the achievement of gender equality goals in the context of digitalisation. More specifically, we were interested in understanding the project through these guiding questions:

What changed for the CSOs in terms of

- o Thinking about gender
- o The place of technology in their frontline processes of the SE
- o The larger dynamics of women's [work] lives

What contributions to knowledge were made

- o By building a scholarly community around questions of gender, tech, & work
- o Through direct research outputs
- o Through engagement with the public and policy discourse

III. Methodology

The evaluation team, comprising the two authors of this report, used a combination of methods in collecting data on the project, as outlined below, and summarised in the table that follows.

1. Desk research: We read through the annual reports (2020-2024), Participatory Action Research outputs (baseline studies and technology-readiness assessments, end-line assessments, techno-design blueprints, and longitudinal action plans), stories of change documented by the team, and research articles and policy white papers produced based on the project. We also had access to the knowledge outputs created by participants in the National Gender Fellowships (two rounds) and the Think Pieces commissioned from among a global pool of experts in a range of related fields.
2. Interviews with the IT for Change project team.
3. Interviews with the leadership teams of the three CSOs (LabourNet, Vrutti, SEWA).

¹ oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/development-co-operation-evaluation-and-effectiveness/evaluation-criteria.html

4. Interactions with representative field-level staff and frontline workers of the three SEs, with a view to understanding their experience of digitalisation in their line of work.
5. Interviews with one member each at the funding organizations: EU-India office and FES-India.

Stakeholder Group	Number of interviewees
IT for Change Project Team (online and offline)	3
Funder (EU) (online)	1
Secondary Funder, Collaborator (FES) (online)	1
SEWA Cooperative Federation (all online)	
Leadership	1
Field workers	3
Vrutti	
Leadership (offline)	2
Field workers (online)	5
Labournet (all offline)	
Leadership	2
Intermediary/trainer	1
Field workers	8
National Gender Fellowship (online)	2

All the data collection was carried out between mid-February and the third week of March, 2026. The considerable output from the project proved to be a valuable resource in understanding the assumptions underlying the implementation design and the manner in which the field engagement proceeded, while the interviews gave us a sense of the experience at different levels and the perspectives and expectations of the various stakeholders. The interviews followed an open-ended conversational format, where our intention was to gain an understanding of how the CSOs had experienced the project, the challenges and learnings on the ground, and any shifts that may have occurred in how they saw the intersection between gender and technology in the specific contexts of their work. Our interactions with the field

level and frontline workers offered valuable inputs to seeing how the initiative unfolded in practical terms.

The insights presented in this report derive from these conversations, contextualised against the detailed documentation and outputs from the project. The evaluation proceeded from a feminist standpoint, reflective of the approach taken by the project and the spirit with which it was carried out. This entailed deep listening, attending to the gender dynamics of the socio-technical spaces that were part of the project, and remaining sensitive to signs of adaptation, resilience, and responsiveness. This evaluation report is an attempt to understand both the process and outputs from the project, and to glean learnings from the experience that could inform future projects and processes for all the stakeholders involved, but primarily for IT for Change.

IV. Points of departure/arrival in the field

An action-research project, however simple and straightforward, must contend with field realities and politics at every level, that can both constrain and complicate it. Interventions that draw on partnerships between different kinds of organizations hold the potential to break the theory/practice, imagination/implementation divide. This project had two key objectives:

Objective 1: Enhanced practices of social enterprises to support women workers in the digital economy

Objective 2: Enhanced advocacy effectiveness of stakeholders (leaders of SEs, CSOs, young leaders, and scholars) in the development of gender perspectives in global and national policies, processes, and strategies related to the digital economy.

The project was set up between March and June 2020, during which period the COVID pandemic necessitated a nationwide lockdown and led to some restructuring of the design and nature of engagement with the Social Enterprises. Each of the three CSOs involved in this project offers a view into a different field reality, has a different mode of engagement with the social enterprises and stakeholders, and therefore presents a distinct experience of the digitalisation for the women workers they engage with. For a feminist organization like IT for Change, it would be important to meet the SEs where they were, in terms of the technology as well as gender dimensions, which meant recognizing and unpacking the complexity of the lived experience of the women operatives. All three enterprises were using technology in different ways, requiring capacity building of different kinds. Labournet already had an LMS, but the project shone a light on the missing gender aspects, and the need to rethink design from this perspective. While Vrutti had already been using digital tools in the field, they had only seen the field operatives in terms of role, not recognizing the gender dynamics in front of and behind the screen. SEWA Cooperative Federation, on the other hand, was at a completely different phase,

going through a structural change in response to the COVID -19 challenges and the changing nature of the relationship with farmers and the local markets. In 2022, SEWA Federation began the revival of Vatrak Cooperative to restart market linkage practices with farmers along with promoting input and output business activities, which influenced their stage of technology adoption. However, it became clear that in order to engage with such diverse field realities, a certain amount of agility was required, keeping the twin goals of technology adaptation and women's empowerment in mind.

The table below offers an overview of the three CSOs across five dimensions of difference we discerned that were relevant to the project. The diversity also allows the lessons from this project to be adapted to diverse kinds of social enterprises that may exist in the women's enterprise ecosystem. A common factor across all the SEs was that the digital apps were being used more for their own businesses and not for a B2C interface

Diversity Factor	Labour Net	Vrutti	SEWA Cooperative Federation
Location	Bengaluru - Karnataka	Kanakapura, Karnataka and Puddukottai, Tamil Nadu	Tapi and Kheda District Gujarat
Service sector (enterprise segment)	Beauty Gig Workers	Women farmers	Women Farmers
Key Constituency of the Organisation	Young women and men	Rural men and Women	Women
Primary members using the Digital Apps	Urban Women	Rural Women	Rural Women
Prior engagement with Digital technology	Prior rollout of Learning Management Systems	Integral part of operations	Trained women in use of mobile phones for online communication, including meetings, etc.

In relation to the second arm of the project, ITfC has had a long engagement with building knowledge products to inform policy advocacy, earning a place at the table during discussions of digitalisation and internet governance at the national and global levels. This allowed them to design a programme that aimed to build a cohort of young scholars who would be mentored to conceive and create discrete knowledge outputs supported through a National Gender Fellowship and bring in seasoned scholars from across the globe through a commissioning exercise to produce long-form essays that would contribute to diversifying the discourse on Gender and Digitalization. In both cases, a call was put out through multiple online channels and shared in academic and professional networks, drawing in emerging and senior academics, activists, policy analysts and thinkers to the programme, which unfolded in two phases. This was not unduly affected by the lockdown, as the National Gender Fellowship included online and offline mentoring for the fellows, as well as an in-person workshop held in Bangalore in November 2024 for the second cohort.

V. Relevance and Significance of the Project

Conversations across the different stakeholders—leadership and field operatives of the CSOs, the ITfC project team, collaborator, as well as the funding organization—revealed a great degree of alignment in terms of how they saw the project and experienced its outcomes. Given that one of the key aims was to understand the gender dimensions of digitalisation in order to suggest a feminist-informed framework for building capacity, the project’s starting point, during the COVID-occasioned lockdown, was seen as particularly significant. The lockdown forced a pivot towards technology, and in some ways forced the issue of working and living in a digitalising world. As one of our interviewees put it, COVID “created the conditions for this [experiment] to flourish.” The use of networked digital tools, primarily mobile phones with data connectivity, became essential in training and data collection, both of which were key to the organizations involved in this project. The baseline studies in each case revealed that the field realities in each case were differently complex, calling for strategies that would speak to the aspirations of the SEs and their internal logics.

Overall, the impression gained from the three CSOs was that ***the project allowed them the time to pause and reflect on their processes in a granular manner, bringing in a research approach that respected the organizations’ philosophy and goals, and acknowledging the field realities.***

In relation to **Objective 1** (enhancing the CSOs’ ability to strengthen the capabilities of the Social enterprises to adopt digital technologies), we found that the initiative had made a significant contribution in encouraging the organisations to recognise and incorporate into their planning women’s lived experiences, particularly at the technology design level, and also deepen the gender focus in their technology implementation. Even as the organisations had been working closely (or, in the case of SEWA Cooperative Federation, exclusively) with marginalised women,

they had not sufficiently considered the micro-dynamics of gender and how it played out in the field. The project's explicit focus on gender—and its feminist framing—also was seen in how the starting point (of building technology, of designing work flows) was the women's lives and how their work - paid and unpaid fit within that. The ITfC project team's adaptability and resilience in the face of field realities allowed for mutual learning to occur in a way that was itself gender responsive. This is elaborated on further in the sections below.

Objective 2 (Strategies adopted through the project to build the field on gender and the digital economy) was also met, with the targets achieved in both quantitative (numbers of scholars/researchers engaged with, policy events organized or participated in, knowledge outputs produced) as well as qualitatively, in terms of recognized impact. This was articulated by fellows who were part of the National Gender Fellowship, and the two funders, who mentioned that the research outputs were of “very high quality”. We did note that the fellows did not cohere into a community, which perhaps could have grown into a supportive intellectual network as they progressed in their careers, and which may be seen as a potential that remains to be fulfilled.

In the next few sections, we present the key insights that will speak of the design of the project, its critical features that made the collaborative exercise work and how each of the elements came together to create coherent, impactful outcomes.

VI. Learnings from the project

VI.1 WOMEN, TECHNOLOGY, WORK

Based on our conversations with representatives from the different stakeholder groups and our perusal of the documents, we were able to build an understanding of different aspects of the project which reflect the nature of collaboration, key insights on technology-led transformation, and the nuances of women's lived realities that both complicate and accommodate digitalisation in various ways. These observations emerge from the ways in which the partnerships with the three CSOs were navigated, the adaptive mechanisms we were able to note from our conversations as well as in the reports, and in statements made by our interviewees, who are quoted directly where appropriate.

VI.1.A NATURE OF COLLABORATION/PARTNERSHIP

We believe that partnership is a key element of this project, and recognizing that such relationships are often a challenge to establish and navigate, we wished to understand how these dynamics played out. In all cases, the CSO leadership expressed that the collaboration worked because the partnership afforded the space and the means to evolve shared goals and interpret the objectives within the context of their structures and field realities. It is to be noted

that these particular partnerships benefitted from prior association with ITfC in other contexts, and this may have helped ease the way for this project. Hence, it is perhaps not surprising that **Trust** was a key element that was mentioned more than once by both Labournet and Vrutti, with the former mentioning that they received “non-judgmental feedback” at several points from the ITfC team. The design of the project allowed for a great deal of **knowledge sharing**, and as a member of Labournet remarked, “there was **transparency and openness** on both sides, with a willingness to share data and experience”. This made it possible to show **vulnerability** without fear of exposure, leading to more robust field-level analysis.

This collaborative mindset on the part of the field partners as well as ITfC laid the ground for the project to move along smoothly. The relatively long duration of the project, and the fact that COVID forced a slowing down of the initial pace, actually allowed for the time required to build this trust and establish a mutually acceptable process. However, given the ambitious objectives, more than one SE suggested that three and a half or four years is not enough to see change, or to say that “this has happened because of the intervention”.

All three partner organizations said they valued the “research focus” that ITfC brought—something they often struggled to prioritize while managing demanding fieldwork and meeting operational requirements and deliverables. Labournet representatives, for instance, noted that they “understand now how to ask questions around technology and gender”.

Recognising the tacit and codified knowledges that the SEs bring to the table, and acknowledging their expertise and experience, is important. Even though this mutual respect is not an articulated precondition or assumption, it emerged as an important factor in how the CSOs spoke about the partnership with ITfC. The Vrutti leadership mentioned that ITfC’s concurrent engagement with other field organizations as part of the project made it possible for learnings to be shared across the board, even as they appreciated the fact that ITfC was willing to meet them where they were.

VI.1.B INSIGHTS ON TECHNOLOGY

Multiple contextual factors, including but not limited to geography, public infrastructure, social stratification and mores, and local politics, all play a role in how technology is deployed, and the extent to which it is accepted, adopted, and integrated into work and social life. In this project, given the emphasis on building capacity among women at the edges by opening up ways of thinking about technological integration, it was important that ITfC adapt to the workflow established by the CSOs and, as one ITfC team member put it, help design something that would “allow women to thrive in a digitalising world”.

Given the varied locations, experiences, and organizational objectives of the three SEs, the project adopted different approaches to first understanding the “Digital Enterprise Capabilities” of each, and drawing up a road map that was specific to the respective context, prior to evolving a Technodesign blueprint for each. The formative work involved baseline surveys among frontline workers in each SE, to establish an understanding of access and use, followed by audits of the existing digital tools—apps, platforms, and practices to draw out the particularities of the field in each case. For Labournet, this took the form of a worker-centric digital labour platform; for Vrutti and SEWA Cooperative Federation, the focus was on data governance practices in a globalising market. In terms of the number of workers involved at various points, and the technical and knowledge outputs, the project clearly met the stated objectives, but there were points of what we see as “productive friction” that led to formulating the learnings listed below.

Structural factors and infrastructural access limit how and when technology can be deployed: Whether it has to do with women workers in Vrutti moving from “button phones to touch phones” or beauty workers using a shared phone to do business on Labournet’s Nyrah app, or SEWA Cooperative Federation’s workers managing patchy networks, the broader technological and material infrastructure becomes a boundary condition for all digital interaction. This was most palpable in the case of SEWA Cooperative Federation, where the women faced challenges in entering data in the field when network connectivity was poor, and using paper records, or offline data collection as a workaround sometimes led to duplicate entries, as occasionally a worker would erroneously assume the absence of connectivity. One SEWA Cooperative Federation worker noted that “cheap phones do not support all apps,” thus pointing to the fact that there is a hierarchy of access that limits ease of use, efficiency, and possibly even durability. Access to technological infrastructure, whether devices or connectivity, thus cannot be taken for granted, and digitalisation efforts must recognize this.

Digitalisation must fit organisational logics: The Vrutti team pointed to the need for what they called a “phy-gital” interface in the case of their field reality—even as women frontline workers could see the advantage of using the digital platform for data capture, it did not obviate the need to explain the process and spend time on nurturing field-level relationships in order to more easily collect data. For Labournet, even as they had previously experimented with an app-based LMS, the project allowed them to build and trial a beauty services app which was co-designed with women workers. However, even as the app was operationally successful, they now realise that maintaining and running it is a continuing expense that needs to be budgeted for. As a member of the Labournet leadership remarked, “Technology is deceptively cheap and simple”, but requires ongoing investments—suggesting thus that SEs need to be strategic about incorporating it in low-[financial] return spaces. Further, introducing technology at the ground level must recognise its cost for those who are expected to use it. Frontline workers in SEWA Cooperative Federation were given small loans to purchase their own phones, while the beauty

workers trained by Labournet were able to convince their families to support the purchase of a phone when the returns became evident.

Need for a collaborative approach: All technology development and deployment requires a nuanced understanding of how it meets the field and the organizational objectives. The larger technology system operates on a universalist imagination that for the most part leaves out those at the edges. Collaboration is not only about bringing together different sets of expertise within the technology or subject domains, but also about including the voices of end users on all sides of a product. The co-design workshop conducted by ITfC for beauty service aspirants revealed aspects of worker preference and lived experience that a top down design would have never included. For Vrutti, building worker choice into platform design required both upstream and downstream collaboration. Such collaboration recognizes and draws on the socio-technical nature of digitalisation and the politics embedded in design—politics of visual and verbal language, a conscious disavowal of what a Labournet representative called “regressive algorithms”, and a commitment to such ideas as the digital commons. The feminist approach taken by ITfC ensured that these politics were made visible and accounted for in the technodesign blueprints that were developed, thus allowing for the granularity of experience to emerge and potentially built into the design of digital tools. The process of co-design also helped clarify not only the elements of design, but also how the technology must fit into workflows, thus creating the appreciation among the users (the women workers, in this case) that technology must serve the larger goal of their economic empowerment and for the organization, that it not become a goal itself.

Technology and data practices introduce a new kind of politics at the micro level: For frontline workers in Vrutti, digital data collection initially faced some resistance, even suspicion, from farmer-producers, requiring them to provide persuasive explanations of both the process and the reasoning behind the activity. At SEWA Cooperative Federation, on the other hand, the resistance came from a few of the workers themselves, who have refused to “go digital” particularly with financial transactions due to the perceived associated risks of fraud. Both instances point to the additional labour that must often go into digitalisation efforts—emotional or affective labour to prepare a resistant community to participate in new forms of data gathering, and overcoming the apprehension that women have to overcome when they become technological intermediaries.

These experiences underline the challenges that all such initiatives face, which aim to build technological capacity in a context where material, digital, and social infrastructures are strikingly uneven along gender lines.

VI.1.C WOMEN'S LIVED REALITIES WITHIN A DIGITALISING LANDSCAPE

The project proceeded from the understanding that both technology and work are gendered, and the intersection between these two factors in women's lives can be complicated even as its acknowledgment can open pathways to empowerment.

ITfC's explicit gender focus encouraged all three organizations to take a close look at where women were situated in their lives, within their communities, and in relation to the SE as they introduced or considered the introduction of technology. Even as two of the organizations were specifically focused on empowering women at the margins, the project unpacked the many layers of women's lives, making these visible and thus amenable to analysis and understanding. The project design incorporated in-depth conversations with women about their work life, including the unpaid care work as well as underpaid or unpaid work in the family farming operations, the related tasks and roles they had to account for in the daily time use patterns, thus taking on board their practical challenges in taking on the additional duty of data collection and maintenance of digital records.

These direct conversations between ITfC and SE members, therefore, created a space of acknowledgement of women's realities and allowed for a negotiation of what they can and want to change through the process of digitisation, instead of merely speaking of technology as an inherent game changer. The detailed exchanges about not just the "why" of digitalisation, but the pathways to enabling individual members and the SE for better decision making, led to a greater level of acceptance. This also allowed the frontline workers—and more importantly the SEs—to see how technology could be amenable to their existing realities, if the logic was made clear and the interface was responsive to their needs. The time required for these conversations and the insights they brought forth were what ITfC made possible and visible to the CSOs and the SEs they supported.

In the context of the project, women's relationship with technology for the purposes of work was closely tied in with both the politics of work and the politics of gender. Beginning with the most fundamental issue of **access to devices**, the women across the three SEs had variable levels of access, ranging from no access or shared (many of the beauty workers at Labournet) to their own (most of the women farmers).

Another aspect of technology adoption is that it must contend with **time poverty**, which most women working in the informal sector experience. The SEWA Cooperative Federation representative brought out this factor, "A woman farmer has her day full with hours of work before she leaves for the farm, returning to more household chores. All she has on her mind is to be able to make two ends meet. In that frame, we expect them to participate in the collective building processes and also in maintaining records of their produce for the social enterprise. That's a lot to expect from her point of view."

An intangible, but perhaps not entirely unintended, consequence of women's adoption of and engagement with technology is an **increased confidence** that permeates into other aspects of life. A Vritti representative half jokingly noted that more of the women in their sites now also have scooters, after they began to use digital platforms for their work. The SE members themselves mentioned that their technology shift "upwards" from "button phones to touch phones" has given them the confidence to use other devices, including laptops and desktop computers, handling programmes like Excel with ease. A SEWA Cooperative Federation worker said, "Our families now ask us what is new in the digital world as they know the organisation teaches us things even they don't know." Access to personal devices has also made it possible for them to experience leisure in different ways, as one young beauty worker described it, giving her more "me time", and allowing her to explore the world of social media. In subtle ways, the hierarchies and power dynamics within their families begin to shift, possibly even equalise, for women once they have access to and control of technology.

Overall, the confidence of being able to be part of the digital world on their own terms was visible, and noted by the CSO leadership as well.

VI.2 LEARNINGS FROM THE PROJECT: 2. SHIFTING THE DISCOURSE THROUGH KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

The second major objective of the project had to do with building out the field in terms of the discourse around digitalisation, platformisation, and feminist approaches to work. This was accomplished through a fellowship programme, commissioned think pieces, and engagement with various national and international policy forums.

ITfC's has built a reputation for producing high-quality critical research in the field of technology politics and the future of work, consistently informed by a feminist approach. Our close reading of the process of conceiving, selecting for, and running the two cohorts of the national gender fellowship revealed a well-designed programme with clear criteria for selection. The two cohorts represented a diverse group of young scholars with varied interests but a shared commitment to feminist-informed research into the future of work in a digital world.

Across our conversations with the two fellows, each representing one of the cohorts, some common themes emerged. The fellowship created an opportunity for young scholars from across the country, often from small towns and remote regions, to engage with new ideas and be exposed to interdisciplinary approaches. They appreciated the close mentoring and attention to detail in reviewing their work, and the interaction (in the September school) with experts in relevant fields. One of the scholars we spoke with said that she gained considerably in confidence, and her own research output was much appreciated not only within the programme but elsewhere, leading to invitations to write for and interview with mainstream media on the subject. The other fellow appreciated the opportunity to pursue an empirical

project that allowed her to do field work and engage with communities directly—something she had never done before. She remarked that the fellowship had given her “access to certain rooms” and ways to engage with decision making groups. Their work, published and disseminated through ITfC’s platforms, gained a level of visibility that they felt they may not have had otherwise.

The fellowship also had the potential to build a community of young scholars but apart from the Bangalore workshop and the research presentations, there were no other formal opportunities or mechanisms for fellows to interact and exchange ideas. Such fellowships do offer the possibility of continued solidarities and becoming communities of practice, and this perhaps could have been given some more thought.

The intellectual and material impact of the project is clearly documented in the many publications, strategy maps, and policy briefs that emerged from the field engagements and the meetings and conferences—particularly “Roots of Resilience” conference in Trivandrum in December 2023, which brought together knowledge partners, field level social enterprises, and state representatives to debate and discuss the possibility of worker rights in a platform economy. This led to the “Trivandrum Declaration” that outlined an alternative vision for worker-led platforms—which also found a mention in the technology roadmap that emerged from the Labournet-ITfC partnership, the latter signalling that the two arms had an organic “learning” connection.

Both EU and FES were extremely appreciative of the volume and quality of research outputs from the project, which ranged widely, from empirically grounded reports to policy briefs to discussion papers emerging from conferences. An EU representative remarked that this was a “different kind of organization” than those that usually receive funding, while FES-India was made aware of the international reputation that ITfC already had with their global network.

VII. The view [of ITfC] from the field

IT for Change, while leading the project, functioned in many ways like a “**research partner**” as the CSOs saw it, sharing in their journeys and learning alongside them even as they brought in their expertise in applying critical methods with an understanding of feminist approaches. As mentioned at several points by the leadership of all the three CSOs, the project—and in particular IT for Change—brought home to them the value of pausing to think through their process and to look closely at the social dynamics of the contexts where they worked, specifically in relation to gender. “They brought in the **perspective of gender and technology**—that combination is not easy to come by,” said a Labournet source, continuing, “at that point, we did not know how to be a platform,” (particularly one that attended to the needs of women users). They were able to do this “**without judgment**,” said another Labournet

representative, and this allowed them to open up the organization to ITfC in a climate of mutual trust.

For Vrutti, among the key takeaways was the **importance of documentation**—a process which then gave them the material to reflect upon and understand the nature of roadblocks they were facing. “We had very low adherence to our [homegrown] digital platform,” they noted, “But when IT for Change came in, by bringing in the gender angle, they helped us see what was preventing our frontline workers from using the technology.” They shared that they were able to convert these insights into significant change in their training for digital uptake. They said, “Instead of teaching them frame by frame the app interface, after a basic introduction they now give their participants simulated field scenarios and ask the participant to explore if the app can be of help.” This, they said, led to better adoption and realisation that the data entry was not the end task but only the first in the entire tech adoption that can lead to better decision-making at the aggregate SE level. This was echoed by SEWA Cooperative Federation: “We are usually focused on implementation; they forced us to pause and think about how we can gain insights from research.”

In sum, we present here a selection of quotes from representatives of the three CSOs that speak to the two main objectives of the project, that provide a sense of the distance traveled in qualitative terms. To the final question posed in our interviews, “**Did the project help you to implement digitalisation in a manner that was gender responsive and respectful of feminist principles?**”

“We had never considered the worker in terms of gender, only in terms of role.” (Vrutti)

“We asked [the women] the question: where and how do you want to work?” (Labournet)

“We did not want to work with a regressive algorithm, and this helped us think through the process.” (Labournet)

“Pace and learning with such a partnership is different...but it would have been good to also spend some time on product development.” (SEWA Cooperative Federation)

In the area of **knowledge generation and contribution to the discourse on gender, technology, and livelihoods in a digitalising world**, our conversations with fellows as well as funders suggested that they viewed IT for Change as a key player in the knowledge space.

Fellows gained an understanding of how to think through an empirical study and present it persuasively, also learning (though to a limited extent) from peer interactions across the cohort. Their research publications were showcased in ways that allowed wider reach than may have

been possible with traditional scholarly publishing, giving them the much-needed confidence as early career researchers.

The Trivandrum conference was seen as an advocacy success by all stakeholders involved, leading to a declaration on just platform design that was adopted by the Kerala state government.

VIII. Conclusion

Projects such as these, while they may be focused on objectives around quantifiable outputs, can, with the right mix of relational intelligence, an understanding of complementary strengths and shared goals, lead to outcomes that sustain change on a deeper level.

We find through our evaluation that ITfC brought a valuable mix of intellectual rigour and field-facing pragmatism to the way in which the project was designed, implemented and documented. Their ability to listen closely to voices from the field, adapt to different challenges without losing focus, and their commitment to a feminist vision helped steer the project successfully.

The document review confirms this in more objective terms, with numbers of women trained, co-design workshops held, and baseline and endline surveys attesting to the work done. In relation to the second objective too, we draw from the viewpoints expressed by the fellows and the donor organizations.

Despite the project's successes, it was not without gaps and challenges, some of which (time, the lockdown, organizational realities) have been mentioned above. A few of the challenges that were expressed by our interviewees, and that we discerned, were beyond the scope of the project itself but need a mention as they are significant in terms of possibilities of replication and scale.

Above all, we learned that technology costs are never small. One of the interlocutors remarked that technology (at any level) is neither uncomplicated nor inexpensive. Adding a layer of gender responsive digital technology would be a little more than the base investment in building the digital architecture. When working in remote and hard-to-reach locations, this project brought out clearly that infrastructure-level assumptions too must be recognized at the outset.

Yet, working within these constraints and steered firmly by a feminist logic of inclusion, the need to dismantle patriarchal power grids, and meet women where they are, to discover pockets where agency can be realised, the project did fulfil its objectives.

❖ **Postscript: Things to reflect on**

As we closed the formal requirements of the evaluation, as feminists co-travellers, we offer some thoughts that need more reflection and consideration of possible pathways that the next phase of such a project can open up.

- This project allowed SEs to pause and reflect on marginalisation on the basis of gender, but this may be true of other identity markers as well. Tech is often seen as an enabler to realise scale, but when you ignore the contextual pathways at the last mile, you often create new marginalisations or do not address what it is doing to the people for whom it is meant.
- Feminist work often restricts itself to issues of power, intersectionality, identity—but the project forced a lens beyond the ideological to engage with what’s happening in the real world—feminism has to be knocked at and knocked out in different ways;
- While the project set out to document and build into techno-design the “hidden aspects of labour”, what must also be acknowledged is that such projects also count on the labour of workers at the margins to inform design, to articulate their worklives in ways that can be codified, to bear the burden of improving their lot. The payoff is of course that they are able to use tools of their making, better suited to their everyday realities.
- How can you bring the two –pragmatic and ideological—together in future projects—what will ITfC do with these learnings?

The evaluators would like to thank all the stakeholders in this exercise: IT for Change, The three CSOs and the SEs involved (SEWA Cooperative Federation, Vrutti, Labournet), the main funding organization (EU), and the secondary funder and collaborator (FES India) for their time and inputs.