

Feminist Perspectives on Digital Economy and Society

IT for Change's School for Digital Futures



Event Report
October 13 & 14, 2021



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As part of the project on 'Centering Women in India's Digitalizing Economy', supported by the European Union (EU), IT for Change (ITfC) organized a virtual feminist Institute on digital economy and society on 13 and 14 October 2021. With the space for interdisciplinary research in gender and the digital economy in India at a nascent stage, ITfC felt it important to conduct this Institute under this project to build research capacities and encourage young scholars in Indian academia. The Institute witnessed participation from the recipients of the National Gender Fellowships — another initiative by ITfC under the EU-supported project. Additionally, since the Institute was organized virtually because of the Covid-19 related change in plans, ITfC was able to open participation to more people than initially anticipated. For the latter, we maintained a screening process to ensure truly interested and dedicated candidates are part of the two-day Institute. We received an overwhelming response, with close to 100 applications from India and 60 international applications. This was in addition to the 21 individuals selected under the National Gender Fellowships – 10 fellows under the Research Fellowship as part of the EU-supported project, and 11 fellows under the Fellowship for Longform Essay as part of a collaboration with the World Wide Web Foundation. Both days of the event witnessed participation of more than 75 individuals. It was an eclectic cohort of people, including independent researchers, early career research scholars from academic settings, development practitioners, lawyers — all of who demonstrated a keen interest in learning about feminist perspectives on the digital economy and society.

The Institute was structured to provide certain reading materials to the participants prior to the event, to enable them to gather a basic understanding of the themes and topics. This was executed through the Moodle platform where we also added an interactive mini quiz for the participants based on the reading materials. To further IT for Change's commitment to the promotion of Free and Open-Source Software, and rejecting proprietary technology, the event was organized through the BigBlueButton platform. The presentations for day 1 and 2 can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#), respectively.

A brief agenda of the Institute is outlined below:

- **[Session 1. Unpacking the Digital Economy: Core Concepts and Issues](#)**
The first day of the Institute started with focusing on building a shared vocabulary and understanding of emerging feminist concerns and issues in the digital economy. A spectrum game format was used by the speakers – Anuradha Ganapathy and Nandini Chami from IT for Change – which was highly appreciated by the participants. The readings provided for this session revolved around the concepts of [platform capitalism](#), [intelligent corporation](#), [data commons framework](#), and [data as capital](#).
- **[Session 2. Why Should Feminists Care About 21st Century Digital Commerce?](#)**
This session – a lecture by Deborah James from Centre for Economic and Policy Research – provided an overview of developments in global trade forums, and how

these policies affect women's rights, especially in the Global South. To enable the participants to get a basic understanding prior to this session, they were provided readings related to [digital trade rules](#), a [feminist roadmap of building back better with e-commerce](#), and using [e-commerce for women's empowerment](#).

- **[Session 3. Changing Ideas of Work and Worker in the Gig Economy](#)**

This session was conducted by Bama Athreya, Fellow at Open Society Foundations and Khawla Zainab, Research Associate at IT for Change. The joint lecture provided a feminist overview of the gig economy with a focus on (i) women's participation, position, and concerns, (ii) empirical exploration of women's productive and reproductive roles, and (iii) legal contentions and policy suggestions for women workers' rights. An attempt was made to familiarize participants with these nuanced concepts and ideas through readings around [digitized work](#), [platform economy and women](#), [macro frames of microwork](#), and [beauty and the platform economy](#).

- **[Session 4. Governance by Platforms: Where is the Power Shift?](#)**

The first session of the second day, an interactive session in a quiz format by Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami from IT for Change, discussed the challenges for democratic governance in the shift towards the digital paradigm. The readings provided specific to this session were extensive and revolved around the concept of [public utility](#), the [Facebook whistleblower](#), and [paradoxes of the digital age](#), among others.

- **[Session 5. Platformization and Development Justice: A Feminist Perspective](#)**

This lecture, conducted by Laura Mann from the London School of Economics and Political Science, highlighted how platformization impacts development pathways and international labor hierarchies. The participants were provided with a varied list of reading material ranging from understanding [global value chains and gender](#) to [digital platforms as privatized infrastructures](#).

- **[Session 6. The Social Dilemma in AI Society: What is the Feminist Way Out?](#)**

The last session of the Institute witnessed an impeccable panel with Burcu Kilic from Public Citizen, Erika Smith from Association for Progressive Communications, and Mariana Valente from InternetLab. The panel was moderated by Anita Gurumurthy from IT for Change. The panelists unpacked and explored the political economy of social media ecosystems and examined implications for policy and transformative change. The readings revolved around the [General Assembly report on gender justice](#), a [feminist social media future](#), and [why should people be worried about how much information WhatsApp shares with Facebook](#).

Through the Moodle platform, the participants were urged to fill feedback forms at the end of each day of the Institute, to enable us to gauge their perspectives and identify areas where we could have done better. We received an overwhelming response through the feedback system, majority of them appreciative of the Institute and what it brought along with it.

An overwhelming majority of participants felt that the inputs and discussions across all sessions were very relevant, in addition to appreciating the format of the sessions. The fact that 77 percent of the participants (Figure 1 below) felt that the lectures offered a deep exploration of the topics is also evident from the subjective feedback received from them.

For instance, one participant stated that, "A lot of really important perspectives of the gendered narratives of the digital economy of which I am yet to build a holistic perspective on, opened up many avenues of exploration for me. Very high-quality sessions!" Another said, "I now have concepts and frameworks to start engaging with these issues, so a big thank you!"

The Institute received flattering feedback from a cohort of individuals, ranging from PhD scholars, Indian students, international scholars, practitioners in the technology and development space, and more. The Institute made an impact by bringing to the fore newer perspectives in formats and around topics that are much needed.

To that effect, a participant also noted that “Since I have mostly been looking at the role of Internet and AI from a cultural perspective, the discussion on policy-making/changing and development of a feminist framework to govern such policies, has been especially insightful for me.”

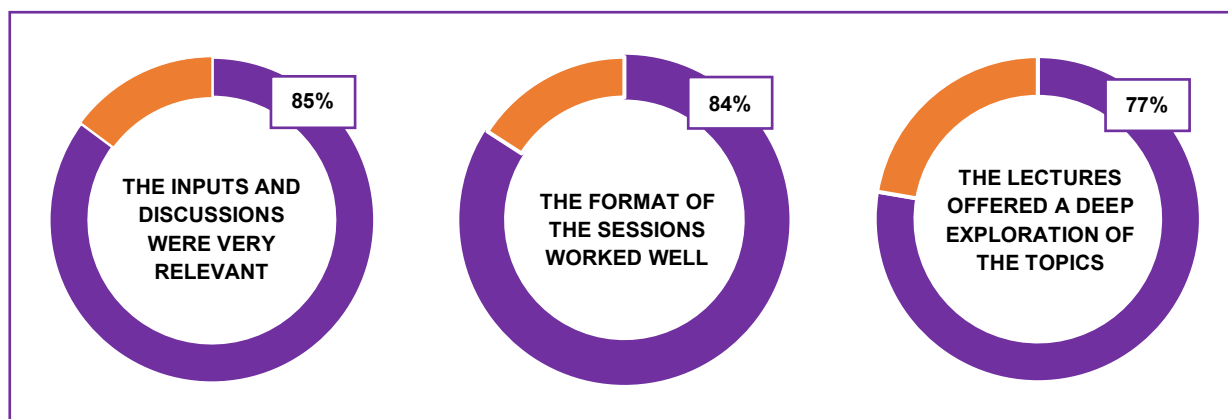


Figure 1: Type of responses we received

Various PhD scholars and early career researchers found the content of the sessions helpful with their respective research topics and enabled them to explore nuanced and varied perspectives to take away. The participants also greatly appreciated the resources made available to them through the Moodle platform “I think that the way ITfC approached the concepts related to the theme was brilliant. Also, I’ve found the recommended readings really useful for deepening the learning process”, stated one participant.

An independent researcher and one of the recipients of the National Gender Fellowship also said, “Thank you so much for organizing this. The two days have been most illuminating, especially in recognizing the role of technology in feeding into my work on public policy. Leads to new resources have been extremely helpful!”

The responses to the feedback form also revealed that more than 60 percent of the participants gave a rating of **excellent** to the Institute. And more than 97 percent participants found the **Moodle course to be useful**.

This Institute has been an endeavor by IT for Change to push the discourse forward and understand better the digital realities of today and tomorrow. One participant put it best, “While the ever-increasing dominance of technology in our everyday lives seems overwhelming, the discussions held during this Institute have not just imbued a sense of optimism but also brought attention to various new aspects of technology...”