

A feminist future of work in the post-pandemic moment

A new social contract as if women matter



Anita Gurumurthy



Feminist Digital Justice is a collaborative research and advocacy initiative of IT for Change and DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). We aim to reinterpret the emerging techno-social paradigm from a Southern feminist standpoint. The project foregrounds debates at the intersection of enduring feminist concerns about gender justice and women's human rights on the one hand, and emerging issues at the digital frontier on the other. It responds to the urgent need for Southern visions of transformative change in these times of paradigmatic shift, exhorting feminists from the South to engage with the political economy of data, and to use their knowledge and experience to reframe the debates. In doing this, we seek to support and strengthen informed and cutting edge feminist analysis and action.

This is the first piece in a series of issue papers that traces the contours of a feminist development agenda for the digital economy.



IT for Change is a Bengaluru based not-for-profit organisation engaged in research, policy advocacy and field practice at the intersections of digital technologies and social change, with a specific focus on social justice and gender equality. See www.itforchange.net for more.



Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) is a network of feminist scholars, researchers and activists from the economic South working for economic and gender justice and sustainable and democratic development. See <http://dawnnet.org/about/> for more.

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1. Digital economy – a feminist frame

When we talk about the digital economy, we refer to the increasing reorganization of market exchange by platforms. That begs the question – what are platforms?

A platform is the new market force, based on what may be called ‘data value chains’. The 21st century economy is predicated on the “invisible hand”, to adapt from Adam Smith’s idea, the unobservable market mechanism of the ‘platform’ that orchestrates market exchange.

To bring feminist perspectives into this equation, we need to look closely at what is valued and how value is created. As things stand today, the platform economy – dominated as it is by a few firms – is extractivist, exploitative, and expedient. It is based on an unsustainable model with scant regard for natural resources; built on the back of a global division of labor that bears the marks of race, class, gender, and geography. And it propels itself on a free market arrogance that knows no boundaries, geographic and otherwise, operating as it does with impunity – tax evasion, price manipulation, wage theft, political arm-twisting, and more. Key to the value proposition of platform firms is the intangible asset of data, data that is stolen and hoarded from people and nations.

Who corners the value? Platform owners, their financiers, and the minuscule elite of techies – a close-knit hyper masculine circle whose incestuous connections, crossholdings, and revolving doors in policy are mindboggling. The digital economy is replete with plots that keep you on a nail-biting edge – dramatic acquisitions, curious VC investments, and even ruthless cannibalizations – in a business culture that is about move-fast-break-things, and if you can’t, simply move-fast-take-things; corner market value with the godly precision of algorithms you own.

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2. Where are the women in the digital economy

The value question is also important because in the hierarchies of labor in the digital economy, you have visible and invisible work and workers. The glamor boys are everywhere. And like supply chains in the traditional economy, where women's contribution to family enterprises goes uncounted, or female low-end workers in global supply chains are rendered barely visible, so also, in the platform economy, an entire discursive and legal apparatus is deployed to ensure that those who don't count are kept invisible and irrelevant. They are endowed with exalted titles like 'independent contractor', 'driver-partner', 'service provider' etc. – obfuscations that allow 'invisible', 'essential' work (an obscure term describing women's unsung everyday work that has suddenly acquired prominence in the machismo 'war' against the virus) to feed the data supply chain.

The lowest segments of the platform economy are feminized – they include the women farmers who keep up the supply of vegetables to all the grocery platforms supplying to cities, women warehouse assistants who work without a pee break, women who do dehumanizingly monotonous work in data centres, women domestic helps whose service you order in like your pizza without really changing the gender division of drudgery. In this economy, there is no room for human reproduction – things like pregnancy are not admissible. The platform gig must blaze a seamless trail, 24x7.

The invisible, essential worker is assimilated into a capitalist surveillance universe – where she is rendered a quantified element of the data machine, surveilled continuously and stripped of rights, a dispensable part that keeps the techno-material basis of the digital economy up and running. In the digital economy, labor is mythified as meritocratic individual enterprise that can claim equal opportunity in an open world of freedom from rigidity, whereas in reality, it is built on a naturalized precarity – the feminization of labor power itself.

3. Digital economy futures through the prism of the COVID crisis

The COVID-19 crisis has had far-reaching impacts on core sectors in developing countries. Predictions in the Asian context show that agriculture, fisheries, food processing, textile, tourism, domestic work, and retail – all with high female work force participation – are poised to be the worst affected by the pandemic. We are bound to see women in artisanal, agriculture, and services sectors hit badly.

We still don't know how digital age bailouts will happen once the immediate crisis is over. But a tragicomedy is already unfolding. Platform companies with multimillion dollar valuations that have all along denied workers their rights, are now crowdfunding benefits – appealing to the public to raise money – to offer security to workers battling the COVID crisis. Feminists have all along argued for the socialization of care, but care socialization by platform companies speaks to a perverse inventiveness of neo-liberalism – a normalization of consumer dependence on privatized public utilities, a desperation by governments and consumers alike to keep them going. Small traders, street hawkers – mostly female – are in lockdown, with grave implications for household food security, but some countries have allowed e-commerce giants to sell non-essentials. The structural corruption of the digital economy and its brazen socialization of business risk and obligation are a huge moral threat to our futures.

After the Asian financial crisis in 1998, Thailand promoted its agricultural sector, pushing up exports. Many countries in Asia also institutionalized social protection. With the march of digital technology and the birth of the new corporate heroes in the 2000s, neo-liberal globalization was already beginning to see a new horizon for profiteering. The legend of Alibaba goes back to the SARS pandemic of 2003 that gave the small company a big break. The financial crisis of 2008 forced the birth of a sharing economy, including the Uber model. Disaster capitalism is a predictable formula. It reaps rewards from crises.

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The forecasts today point to a new opportunism for digital businesses and some are already readying themselves to become bigger by diversifying their portfolios and through acquisitions. Alphabet, Google's parent company, is already buying big data firms — its enormous acquisitions include Fitbit. The crisis will only make it convenient for them to go on a buying spree at rockbottom prices.

The future is digital. A small but important indicator is that in this period of lockdowns, online payments are going up in many developing countries. And this is here to stay. But the present of the digital economy is based on structural injustices. In Asia, only China features in the top 10 countries in the data economy, and only Japan and India in the top 25. Thanks to trade rules, developing countries cannot levy tariffs on foreign e-commerce companies. However, in a world that is embracing 3D printing, import tariffs on physical goods will gradually see a fall. Some projections suggest that by 2040, 50 percent of manufactured goods could be 3D printed. If revenue streams from import tariffs are cut off, poor countries can face extreme hardships in financing social policies, with debilitating impacts on gender budgets / budgets for women.

The data economy model that developing countries have embraced is not really based on sectors that add value to the aggregate economy in terms of innovation and production of real goods and services. It is based mostly on outsourced work — online work in translation, data entry, and annotations, and some in software development. Only some countries have a footing in digital services like cloud computing and digitally deliverable services. Women are hardly present in these sectors. Their businesses usually do not even have a website, let alone sophisticated cloud computing facilities.

If foreign companies affected by the pandemic stop outsourcing online work, the few women in these sectors will lose their jobs. Meanwhile, e-commerce will take off, and while it is clear that it will boost high-end consumption, it is unclear how domestic supply chains will benefit.

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4. A feminist digital future

For our digital future to be feminist, the need of the hour is to go local – and look at how data value chains can strengthen local economies of production and innovation in which women are visible and valued, and natural ecosystems, respected. The digital's inherent propensity for distancing has worked well for the new global feudals and their business models. But it has dematerialized the space of labor – atomising labor, depublicizing marginal bodies. Digital innovation in robotics and AI has rendered feminized labor dispensable in the value creation process.

Experts from around the world have called for a focus on distributive justice in the post-COVID moment. Distributive justice does not have any meaning unless social reproduction is central to its real world execution. A new social contract as if women matter is necessary and possible today. This means ensuring social and economic citizenship for women. Technology cannot be trusted to lead the economy. Economic policy must lead the choice of technology.

A feminist digital economy means many things. Women need a legally guaranteed right to the internet – and poor women need free data allowances. They need access to new training opportunities. Intermediaries supporting labor need to step up their strategies to reach and retrain women workers online. Public investments are needed in digital infrastructure and to stimulate data value chains through appropriate laws and policies in personal and non-personal data. Agenda setting for the digital economy needs to focus on domestic value chains, expanding jobs for women, and AI innovations for the public sector (health, energy, transportation etc.) to find solutions to the crisis of care. Expanding effective public provisioning of services is an important national priority in developing countries. Platform marketplaces that are linked through decentralized community collection centres can support small agriculture, and cloud infrastructure provided as a public good can boost small and micro businesses.

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Governments have a duty to reimagine the role of technology for a rights-based citizenship rather than use it to lock the poor out and unleash authoritarianism in the name of security. The Indonesian union of small fisherfolk crippled by the COVID crisis have appealed to the government to datafy and digitalize the sector and enable greater efficiencies. Supply-side dynamics that can reboot the economy depend on such data infrastructures. Taxation databases can be used to target subsidies to MSMEs, enabling them to retain their staff. Credit guarantees can be used to encourage banks to lend to MSMEs with incentives for digitization.

Big Tech is bound to flex its muscle in the post-COVID period. Worldwide, there is an emerging consensus that taxation and competition law need to be revamped to contain the excesses of the digital economy. However, these traditional instruments can go so far and no more. The path ahead calls for bringing laws up to speed to situate labor rights in the digital moment. Platform exceptionalism in labor rights can prove to be costly, demolishing economic security and pushing up precarity and inequality. In the middle of the pandemic the Insurance Regulatory Authority in India has directed all employers to compulsorily provide insurance to employees. This may be a good move, but small enterprises employing the majority of the workforce are cash strapped, and need more than dictats from the top to reboot. They need innovative public financing channels that can result in benefit sharing with employees.

But the most important breakthroughs are waiting to happen in alternative forms of economic organization. Let us not forget that the decentralized power of the internet can be harnessed to promote social and solidarity economies – cooperatives that can federate through data value chains – transferring data dividends from corporations to labor.

Internationally, it is necessary to adopt indicators that capture the Gross Data Product and the share of labor – specifically, the share of female labor – in the data economy. New macro economic policy frameworks – such as the CARE framework adopted by Argentina and South Korea – need to go hand in hand with attempts to build an equitable and feminist digital economy.

International funding needs to invest in the collectivization of women workers in data value chains. It is time that developing countries came together to propose a multilateral framework for data and AI that promotes just and egalitarian future societies. A new internationalism is urgently necessary to rebuild the global trade paradigm so that it is fair and just.

Without a new feminist global-to-local pact, we risk putting women into a corner

Today, in the deeply worrying stories of an invisible pandemic of domestic violence world over, we see the economy's connections to gender relations and norms laid bare. Without a new feminist global-to-local pact, we risk putting women into a corner, under extreme duress, even as the platform economy and its DNA for viral proliferation finds new online avenues to discuss neo-liberal ideas of bodies, beauty, and wellness. Policy choices for the digital economy hold the key to social and economic citizenship for women. Business as usual with new neo-liberal flavors can re-privatize women's labor, erasing their contributions to value creation, and driving their physical bodies back into places that are hidden



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