

Session Report

Session 94 : Working Session- #Leave no woman behind - Furthering gender equality in the digital economy

World Trade Organization(WTO) Public Forum 2018



Organizers

- Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era network (DAWN)
- *Federación Argentina de Empleados de Comercio y Servicios (FAECYS)*

Panellists

- [Anita Gulumurthy, Executive Director, IT for Change](#)
- [Aileen Kwa, Programme Coordinator – Trade and Development Programme, South Centre](#)
- [Sofia Scasserra, Economic Adviser, International Relations Department, Federación Argentina de Empleados de Comercio y Servicios](#)

Moderator

- [Cecilia Alemany, Executive Committee member, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era \(DAWN\)](#)

The digital economy can be a game-changer for gender equality, especially in developing country contexts. But this potential can be unlocked only when there are in place, policy roadmaps focussing on women's meaningful inclusion in the digital marketplace and on creating 'high value' opportunities through digital innovations in key economic domains.

The session, '#Leave no woman behind - Furthering gender equality', attempted to outline the key elements of this roadmap. Cecilia Alemany from DAWN, who moderated the session set the stage. She spoke about how the economy has transformed the ways we work, produce and trade, consumption and social organization. The most powerful transnational companies today are technology companies whose business models are based on data and their economic value. They "own" and use our data to make profits. Current laws – both hard and soft – lag behind, in efforts to secure the rights of people to own the data they produce and break market monopolies. The corporate capture of states has further reduced accountability towards citizens on how their data is used, thereby affecting economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as, civic and political rights.

There needs to be an in-depth understanding of the digital economy impact from a human rights perspective, Cecilia noted, observing how after centuries of trying to regulate and overcome our "state of nature", we seemed to be back to an era where platform companies and authoritarian regimes are transforming not only our social and economic capacities but also whether we decide to vote.

She concluded by noting that we were in the middle of a deep transformation. While optimistic voices abound on how "the market" and "innovators" will fix our lives and future, historically marginalized groups and women in the global South have not been the real beneficiaries of this new economy. In this context, DAWN's collaboration with IT for Change, the Digital Justice Project was an effort to frame these issues from a feminist perspective, and to promote further debates and exchanges, she said.

Anita Gurumurthy from IT for Change spoke about how trade policy could work towards women's rights and gender equality. She began by making the point that trade policy is not gender-neutral and decisions with respect to governance of trade in goods and services and regulation of investment flows have complex, and sometimes contradictory, impacts on women's well-being. The dominant discourse has been largely pro-liberalization and deregulation of digitally-mediated trade in goods and services, an agenda that has gained traction even among developing countries with limited digital and data capabilities, thanks to the power of the policy rhetoric of 'e-commerce for development.'

Maybe there were some women who could sell artisanal cupcakes online today, but hundreds of millions of women are being affected by the entire scenario of trade and they aren't in control of the rules organizing their economies, Anita noted. There is a free association of technological progress and new rules, with trade association shrinking policy spaces for developing countries in instruments such as the WTO, Trade in Service Agreement (TiSA), Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and so on.

Anita presented three key concerns in this regard; 1. How the push for deregulation of digitally-enabled services shrinks policy space for women's rights 2. How the proposals for e-commerce tariff liberalization will add to women's double burdens in the global South and; 3. How the rhetoric of promoting women's Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) ends up as a decoy for the dominant digital policy agenda. She concluded by presenting highlights of a strategic road map for gender-based inclusion in the digital economy.

Aileen Kwa from the Trade and Development Programme, South Centre, outlined the ways in which trade in its current form does not work for the interest of all. Within global value chains, big companies were amassing the bulk of profits. Further, challenges come up on account of the fact that within the digital economy, anti-competitive practices have fueled the successes of the digital

economy.

As a starting point, to make trade work for women, trade measures needed to be made more equitable, Aileen argued, especially in sectors that involved the livelihood of large numbers of women such as in agriculture and manufacturing. While developed country members in the WTO would rather not deal with these older policies, the fact remains that this is a 20th century issue that has been dragged into the 21st century and remains a problem, with women farmers and small producers remaining very disadvantaged by the same.

Secondly, trade rules must afford all countries the opportunity and capacity to industrialize, and not just those who are currently competitive. This is important for increasing the employment opportunities of women in the economy. Most critically, we need to reverse the trend of 'hyper globalization' noted Aileen, given that it was important that domestic and local economies be allowed to flourish. Curbing the current deregulation drive in e-commerce contained within instruments such as Agreement on Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs), would be an important step towards this.

Sofia Scasserra from the International Relations Department, FAECYS began by debunking the myth that technology could be a gender-neutral force. The vacuum cleaner and the washing machine are gender-neutral but we cannot say that the vacuum cleaner is the great equalizer because it is used by women, she observed. Focusing on the future world of work, Sofia noted that technology brings about a new business model, and thus a new labor model. She outlined three job categories in talking about how workers were being affected by the digital economy.

The first aspect is outsourcing, which had now morphed into 'platform work'. There is this fantasy that platform workers are entrepreneurs; she said, but they are always being watched by an algorithm which evaluates their performance and productivity. Algorithms, designed through and for a male gaze rate women's performance on unfair ground, thus leading them to get lower ratings and lower remuneration.

The second aspect, Sofia focused on, was the rising tide of automation, and having to deal with the fact that people will have to be reskilled to rejoin the labor market. This too reflects a gender disparity as in the new jobs that are being created, lower wage work is dominated by women, whereas, higher paid jobs are kept by men. We need public policy responses to address women's integration into the STEM economy. It is not simply enough to "include" women in trade but also expand care networks for women to be able to participate more in the economy.

The third aspect, concerned those who are digitally excluded and have little to no access. Not only do they need skills to be in digital economy, Sofia pointed out, but also needed basic infrastructure like electricity at home. Developing nations therefore need the fiscal space to invest in infrastructure. But given that they are being asked to consistently lower taxes makes it impossible for them to invest even in education, health, water, let alone, broadband.

Corina Rodriguez Enriquez who was a discussant in the session emphasized that the gender bias of the digital economy needs to be made visible, analyzed and its problems confronted with global commitment and state responsibilities and obligations. The new and different technical and social organization of work that the digital economy enables calls for a discussion on new and different forms of organization of social protection, whose link with the labor market is increasingly weakened. In short, new ways of distributing economic value are generated.

This extends to the question of how those occupied in activities where working conditions are so poor and wages so low that automation is not profitable, can be included, Corina observed, noting that in many countries women are over-represented in these spaces of vulnerability.

Additionally, it was important to avoid gender-washing and appropriation of women's' labor agendas by those who want to expand their businesses. Gender-wash of corporations and

governments is an increasingly common practice. She cited the W20 summit program as an example of this, where more than 55 percent of the participants were representatives of transnational corporations or related foundations.

The interactive session with the audience brought forth many important and interesting questions for the panel to engage with. Some key highlights included;

- Precarious work done by women in 'offline settings' such as garment factories are increasingly likely to be affected by the digital economy. How and where, we will be able to see/visibilize issues such as pay gaps or poor working conditions in such contexts will be the challenge. This is but part of the bigger problem in economics – the illegitimacy of women's work. The need of the hour therefore is to make legible the illegible. While this is difficult, there is no reason to believe that the domain of the digital is beyond regulation or oversight.
- Women's integration into the digital economy is also not a singular narrative. When women are organized in the local economy, the platform or digital can help women and further their development goals and aspirations.
- One of the important gaps in policy efforts remains inadequate public education amenities and resources, which are an important stepping stone to be able to participate in the digital economy. Public infrastructure and service cuts often hits women the hardest, cutting of their access to such vital rights.
- It is important to remember that the women's agenda is not really different from the development agenda. We need to call to question, the contradictions between the real effects of trade and the contradictory effects of trade, and the narrative we find that is propelling discourse in the WTO and the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs).