

Feminist Development Policy Goes Digital

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Organizers: Germany, National Council of German Women's Organisations

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1. Feminist-ising the UN Global Digital Compact

The UN Global Digital Compact seeks to outline shared principles for an open, free, and secure digital future for all. These core principles of openness, freedom, and security must be infused with a feminist perspective to ensure that the ongoing digital transformation of our economies and societies can usher in a gender-just world that is affirming of all individuals and their path to self-actualization.

Openness does not automatically mean gender-inclusive, as experiences and studies of the sexism in free culture communities online or gender discrimination on Wiki have demonstrated. We need a pluralistic openness that will lead to feminist emancipation, empowering self-expression, serendipitous solidarity, and trans-local publics.

Freedom for equitable and just societies. This is not just about the negative freedom of the 'freedom from data harm' but equally about the maximization of the public value of the Internet and data-enabled intelligence for vibrant, flourishing, and democratic societies and economies that privilege the role of women as socio-political and economic agents.

A secure digital future is one that guarantees the right of all peoples to development as human flourishing. There is no 'just digital transition' without respect for planetary boundaries, a global public sphere free from gender-based violence, and an enduring peace without the weaponization of cyberspace and the militarization of artificial intelligence (AI).

Over 2022, in dialogue with nearly 100 feminist scholars, practitioners and trade union representatives from the global South, IT for Change and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung evolved a charter of feminist demands from the UN Global Digital Compact. This charter focuses on three central demands:

Corporate accountability for women's human rights. We need a binding global governance framework with concrete commitments for actions by state parties to advance a gender-just digital economy and society, including effective enforcement of women's human rights obligations of digital corporations and penalising corporate impunity. Exclusive reliance on corporate self-governance may not yield results.

A new global social contract for a socially-just digital transition for transforming and harmonizing multilateral policies, including on digital trade, taxation, intellectual property (IP) regimes, and labour rights in digital value chains, to promote political and economic sovereignty for all nations and peoples. Global digital cooperation needs a well-resourced strategy for public digital infrastructure and policy development towards gender-inclusive, livelihoods-oriented, and ecologically respectful digital economy pathways.

Commoning the internet and data resources. The global internet must be reclaimed and governed as a global knowledge and communication commons. Its generative, peer-networking affordances as the horizontal web of hyperlinks must be liberated from the stranglehold of surveillance capitalism and its platform enclosures. A new global digital constitutionalism that recognizes: a) aggregate data as knowledge commons; b) the a priori claims that 'source communities' – communities from whose interactions and territories data is aggregated – have over such commons; and c) the equal right of women in stewarding the use of community data and obtaining an equitable share in its benefits, is urgently needed. Data sovereignty is development sovereignty.

2. How the Agreed Conclusions of CSW-67 can integrate a feminist development perspective on the digital transformation

The Agreed Conclusions of CSW-67 must call for integrating a human-centred, environmentally sustainable and gender-responsive approach to digital transformation in the development of the Global Digital Compact, by ensuring the accountability of transnational digital corporations for the advancement of women's human rights, development financing mandates for public digital infrastructure, and democratic governance of the data commons to eliminate harm and maximise the social value of data.

The Agreed Conclusions must underscore the role of public financing mechanisms for development of gender-responsive national digital policies and frameworks. A shift in frame is in order here; this is a

much-needed transition from bridging divides to creating and provisioning feminist infrastructures and public innovation systems. Commercial actors in AI also tend to under-invest in the crucial work of good quality data collection and annotation, given that this is “time-consuming, invisible to track, and often done under (investor) pressures to move fast due to margins”.

For the guarantee of universal, equal, and safe access to platform, data, and artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructures to be available to all women and girls, developed countries need to commit concrete Official Development Assistance targets. The mid-term SDGs review must commit to dedicated ODA for public platform, data and AI infrastructure development which ensures that 50% value from the digital economy accrues to the bottom 50% nationally and globally, by 2030.

International financial institutions must be called upon to create new mandates to enable and support developing countries to build digital capabilities for domestic development and gender equality. This can build on an assessment of how to strengthen the UN Technology Bank for LDCs, and also take a leaf out of technical cooperation initiatives such as the GovStack. In 2020, ITU, together with the governments of Germany and Estonia, and the Digital Impact Alliance, launched GovStack to assist national governments in establishing interoperable, secure and reusable IT infrastructure in support of their national development objectives. The “GovStack” is a set of digital building blocks that allow national public agencies to harness the power of emerging IT technologies, while minimizing costs and dependence on external contractors. The building blocks can be stacked together to easily build need-tailored, yet technically standardized solutions and services for citizen-oriented use cases in administration, health care, agriculture, education, and more.

3. Policy coherence for feminist development policy in the digital realm

A feminist development policy in the digital realm will be meaningful only when it is also accompanied by a trade policy that is not neo-colonialist. In the domestic policy sphere, the EU prides itself on being the pioneer of a third way to govern the data and AI human paradigm, grounded in indivisible human rights and protection of the data sovereignty of its citizens and data infrastructural capabilities of its local economy. But this is not reflected in its digital trade positions in the international arena where the EU’s demands often trample upon the economic sovereignty of the peoples of the global South.

Take, for instance, the Free Trade Agreement that the EU is currently negotiating with India. [Analysis](#) of the digital trade provisions reveal a range of constraints that they pose to India’s sovereign policy space to determine the directions of its digital policy:

Market access. The e-commerce chapter (Chapter 8) proposed by the EU is new and is consistent with the EU's push for liberalisation of e-commerce in the WTO and in the EU's other FTAs. It demands ambitious coverage that goes beyond mere trade to regulatory issues.

Cross-border data flows. Data may not be able to be stored locally for tax, security and privacy, financial regulation or other reasons by the government of India.

Open government data. Article 14 on open government data implies that if agreed, where the Indian government chooses to make data public, it must endeavour to ensure to the extent practicable that the data is not subject to discriminatory use conditions. This implies that such data must be available to anyone in the world and not just those in India and the EU. In effect, even US companies can use it to make valuable applications and then sell them back to India for a profit.

As Southern feminists have long recognized, there is no gender justice without economic justice and development justice. This maxim continues to hold true when thinking about feminist development policy in the digital age.