

Fit for future? - A Global Digital Compact for Gender Justice

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Organizers: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and IT for Change

Nandini Chami

1. A brief introduction to the charter of feminist demands from the global South

The [charter of feminist demands from the global South](#) was developed by IT for Change and FES, through an extensive consultation process in partnership with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development in the Asia-Pacific region; in the Middle East and North Africa, with Access to Knowledge for Development Center, School of Business, The American University in Cairo; in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Research ICT Africa; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, with FES' Regional Trade Union Programme.

The core idea of the charter is that the agenda of leveraging digital technologies for women's empowerment and gender equality needs more than a ICTs as tools approach and a recognition of digital technologies as deep structure.

It points to two shifts in frames that are urgently needed:

a) Inclusion into what? This is the key question we should be asking when we hear demands for gender inclusion in the digital paradigm

As one of the participants in the consultation process through which the charter was developed, pointed out: "The greatest paradox of our times is that the call for women's inclusion into the connectivity paradigm translates into their co-option into the matrix of data capital. The data economy dominated by Big Tech is exploitative, exclusionary and environmentally unsustainable, reproducing gender inequalities in all their intersectional dimensions."

b) We need to underscore the fact that there is no empowerment without rights, and no rights without addressing structural injustice

As another participant highlighted, "It is not enough to talk about women's digital rights. We need a feminist economics to tackle inter-class and inter-country structures of inequality in the emerging data and AI paradigm"

2. Reflection on the principle of openness. How, practically, can openness lead to feminist emancipation, empowering self-expression, solidarity?

The openness of online communication spaces – where everyone technically has the equal opportunity to freedom of expression because of decentralized, many to many communication that the network offers – will automatically break down traditional barriers to women’s public participation – not just in politics but in the construction of discourses. But this promise has not been borne out for two reasons. In the context of the social media business model that dominates the Internet and relies on the viral circulation of hate to gather more eyeballs to monetize user attention, the credo of preserving online openness has meant a free pass for intimidation, hate, and fear speech and most egregiously, the normalization of sexism and misogyny. “The bird is freed” – Elon Musk tweeted – free for whom? Content moderation guidelines loosening up have more often than not led to an increase in hate speech. Online openness does not automatically create a level playing field where everyone is automatically on the same footing. Research from Whose Knowledge indicates: “Wikipedia - is primarily constructed by (white) men from western Europe and North America. One in ten Wikipedia editors are estimated to self-identify as female. In other words, the internet of the majority is produced by the minority.”

To address these issues and reclaim a pluralistic openness,

1. We need an Internet that is a global communication commons free from the stranglehold of surveillance capitalism – a return to the web of the hyperlink and not the walled garden of the platform.
2. We need effective content governance – human rights compliance and transparency in respect of both content moderation and content curation functions performed by digital platforms
3. We need investment in human capabilities, especially critical media literacy.

3. Reflections on building alternative platform, data, and AI models rooted in social and solidarity economy models

Platform, data and AI models are not to be thought of as disparate technologies but as building blocks of a new production model – the platform firm. By serving as infrastructures of interconnection that mediate interactions between different classes of actors in the economy, the platform firm continually derives data from user behaviour to generate insights for business intelligence and market advantage. Challenging platform extractivism then requires us to re-establish worker control over this new means of production – we need to socialise the ownership and control of the platform firm.

Experiences of traditional cooperative institutions and social enterprises in the global South who have been trying to go platform demonstrate the importance of public platform backbones – provided by the

state as a digital public good. Cooperatives and other collectivist forms of enterprise can then function in a trusteeship model and steward their membership base's data resources.

An interesting initiative in this regard is the Kerala Food Platform. Kerala Food Platform (KFP) is the blueprint for a platform ecosystem focused on the production and distribution of safe-to-eat organic food, that is being developed by the Government of Kerala in India. The experiment seeks to leverage the value of data to support the state's extensive network of agricultural and labor cooperative institutions and equip them to participate in the digitalizing economy. The intent is to provide all cooperatives a suite of publicly created basic digital services for membership records management, business process tracking, and leveraging data-based analytics of cooperative operations for activity planning, monitoring, revenue forecasting, and risk management. Private players will also be on-boarded and given access to the aggregate data for creating useful digital products and services, backed by access and re-use conditionalities that prevent the consolidation of intellectual monopolies.

The pathways envisioned for data value creation and distribution through KFP's ecosystem include equitable data value distribution (data aggregated from cooperative institutions to be governed as a knowledge commons), generative value creation (framework for data ownership/trusteeship in cooperative institutions and provision of agriculture data access to state agencies for public policy decision-making), and checks against data extractivism and violation of privacy rights.

4. The new approach to data governance that we need.

The mainstream approach to data governance seems to be as follows. As long as personal data protection is guaranteed, data aggregated by a platform owner can be their de facto property. This state of affairs ignores the reality that data as a resource is fundamentally relational. Data flows are quite literally structured, collected, and produced so as to relate people to one another. Data flows are designed to reveal meaningful patterns: how we are alike biologically, interpersonally, politically, and economically. A big data set is not a simple aggregate of data points. It is the abstracted knowledge about the relatedness between data points - patterns about people, objects, the environment and the relationship between them..... knowledge that is essentially a social common (dematerialised from society and rematerialised to create value), as scholars such as Salome Viljoen have highlighted.

But is this call for recognizing data as a shared social knowledge commons the same as the public good approach to data governance that is increasingly gaining traction in the UN system, including at the Committee on Food Security and WHO? In this view, data commons must be governed as a global public good, as this will aid open science and innovation that is beneficial to humanity at large. At first glance, this idea seems excellent and in sync with the feminist commitment to preserving the open knowledge commons from enclosure. However, there is a catch. As long as infrastructural capabilities to mine intelligence from data are limited and confined to the hands of a few corporations and states, treating data as a global public good and allowing it to flow across borders without any restrictions will only aid capture of its value by the powerful and consolidation of intellectual monopolies.

The conversation that is missing is about benefit sharing with the source communities from whom the data is extracted and aggregated. We need to figure out a way where an approach akin to the UN CBD's Nagoya Protocol is evolved for the intangible commons of data, where the boundaries of relevant communities are difficult to establish.

5. How do you provide alternatives to the corporate captured multistakeholder model of policy making? What alternatives?

There's a million dollar question that we are faced with. Will the UN Global Digital Compact be able to fulfil the governance deficit stemming from the lack of a global home in the multilateral system for digital public policy issues? IGF-style 'multistakeholderism' has produced a legitimacy crisis, with values of 'inclusion', 'equity', 'participation' and 'fairness' coopted into win-win governance imaginaries that circumvent democratic accountability. The unfinished agenda – from the WSIS – of a global democratic governance framework for the digital paradigm must be taken up. We need a new consensus for a multilateral mandate on digitalization and sustainable human futures along the following key axes:

- initiating a treaty process on digital human rights that articulates the nature of individual and collective autonomy (including protection from state excess and corporate impunity) in the epoch of data and AI as well as the right to development for an equitable international data order (echoing UNCTAD's call)
- setting up a new specialized agency on frontier technologies and sustainability sciences (akin to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) created at the dawn of the telecommunications era) to evolve work programmes, and establish inter-agency cooperation and system-wide coherence.

- mobilizing dedicated public financing for development cooperation in digital infrastructure capabilities, including through ODA and international financial institutions.