Policy & Implementation: Understanding Experiences and Reacting in Order to Mainstream Gender in Digital Development
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Digital Rights that Center Women in Post-Covid Digitized Economies

I want to begin by highlighting how the post-COVID conjuncture has demonstrated that the R in the Rights-Education-Access-Content-Targets (REACT) framework is an urgent imperative for all of us to work on and then move on to talking about two collaborations that my organization, IT for Change, is part of, where we are attempting to address the crisis of gender equality through a rights-based framework.

The general crisis of women's rights

As welfare delivery and emergency cash transfer programmes went "digital by default" with the onset of the COVID pandemic, the world's poorest women and girls fell through critical social security nets. The importance of the right to access as being a passport to women's full citizenship in the digital paradigm was established beyond all doubt. We also witnessed how technology-mediated violence intensified in the post-pandemic period. The pandemic's acceleration of the digitalization of economic activity and value chains has opened up a number of questions about the future of work for women. The evidence so far does not suggest that millions of new jobs will open up for women in the turn to digital automation and platformisation. Rather, gendered labour heirarchies and exclusions from the labour market seem to be becoming more entrenched and a livelihoods squeeze is intensifying for women who are marginal farm-ers, informal workers or small producers in global value chains controlled by platform lead firms.

We are engaged in two collaborations where we are responding to this crisis, by working at two levels.

1. Evolving imaginaries for a gender-transformative digital paradigm beyond critiques of Big Tech and Big Brother.

There is no empowerment without a structural transformation that guarantees women's human rights. From this starting point, we think it is important to explore questions such as: What kind of platform economy do we want that will decentralize economic value rather than one of economic concentration and precarisation? What kind of digital state do we need for a feminist social contract? How can we reclaim the original promise of the Internet as a global communication commons facilitating serendipitous connections and peer production, where women can participate as equal human beings? What does it mean to interpret the digital infrastructure question as a techno-institutional and human capabilities development question?

To reflect on these questions and many more, and arrive at a new vision of a gender-transformative digital future, DAWN and IT for Change co-convened a working group of 36 feminists from the Asia Pacific, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean regions over the last year to start imagining the contours of such a feminist digital justice vision for the digital economy. Access the declaration of feminist digital justice at www.feministdigitaljustice.net

2. Policy action where we shift the frame from addressing the gender digital divide to the need for a binding global governance framework for a gender-just digital society and economy with concrete commitments for actions by state parties and transnational corporations to advance women's human rights.

FES, IT for Change, APWLD, Research ICT Africa, FES Sindical, and the A2K4 D Center of the American University in Cairo have held consultations with nearly 100 feminist scholars, practitioners and trade union representatives, to construct a charter of demands on integrating a feminist perspective into the UN Global Digital Compact. The launch event is: Fit for Future? - A Global Digital Compact for Gender Justice. 8:30 AM - 10:00 AM ET | CCUN 11th Floor, Thursday 9th March.

In conclusion, when thinking through policy action for advancing gender equality in the digital paradigm, it is useful to recall these words of one of the participants in our Africa regional consultation:

 "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."