

## Comments on the Zero draft of the Agreed Conclusions of the 61<sup>st</sup> Session of the CSW on ‘Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work’

### Inputs to the National Consultation on Pre-CSW preparations, Feb 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017

IT for Change, Feb 2017

#### A. Overview

The Zero Draft of the Agreed Conclusions of the 61<sup>st</sup> Session of the CSW does acknowledge the importance of re-calibrating strategies for women’s economic empowerment in the context of digitalisation. However, it **must also recognise that ‘managing technological and digital change for women’s economic empowerment’ is not only about providing access to connectivity and ICT enskillment of women. It is also about furthering the rights and empowerment agenda in the emerging digital economy.**

**The CSW must take cognizance of the digital economy and its restructuring of rules and norms governing the world of work. Measures to integrate women into an unjust digital economic order of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, will exacerbate the economic and political disenfranchisement of the majority of the world’s women.**

The draft views digital technologies as new-age ‘tools’ that have become an intrinsic part of the workplace. But digital technologies are also harbingers of a new networked global economic paradigm – wherein digitalisation of trade shifts value chains and creates new leaner models for global trade.<sup>1</sup>

The text of the Zero Draft seeks to put these ‘new tools’ in the hands of women workers and build their ICT capabilities so that they can effectively leverage them in the new careers that demand a certain minimum level of digital proficiency. This is clearly evident from a reading of para v and para w, reproduced below:

“(v) Support women’s, particularly young women’s, access to skills and training in new and emerging fields, especially science, technology, engineering and mathematical education and digital fluency, by expanding the scope of education and training opportunities;

(w) Ensure universal access to skills, knowledge, information and communications technologies that are economically, geographically, linguistically and virtually accessible to women workers, as well as increased broadband and mobile phone access for women”.

While these concerns are valid, where the draft is silent is in moving beyond the questions of access and skills barriers to ensure **women’s effective participation in the digital economy**. To

1 By some estimates, nearly 50% of the world’s traded services are digitalised and over 12% of the global goods trade is conducted via e-commerce platforms. Cross-border data flows outpace flows of capital. See Manyika, J. et.al. Digital globalisation: The new era of global flows, <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/digital-mckinsey/our-insights/digital-globalization-the-new-era-of-global-flows>

paraphrase the Cancun Declaration – the 2016 OECD Ministerial Declaration on the Digital Economy, a clear focus to ensure that “*initiatives to support the digital economy also help attain the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development...promote gender equality and be inclusive of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.*”<sup>2</sup> is necessary.

To rise to this challenge, the Zero Draft must make room for addressing the following critical concerns.

## **B. Furthering gender equality in the digital economy: key issues/concerns**

### **The precarisation of work in the platform economy and the erosion of women workers’ rights:**

The platformisation of key economic sectors in the digital economy has led to the proliferation of ‘gig work’ (location-based temporary work, such as Taskrabbit’s errand-runners, Ubers’ taxi drivers, etc.) and ‘cloud work’ (web-based microwork such as the freelance marketplace of Amazon Mechanical Turks).<sup>3</sup> Scholars have pointed that there is an overwhelming replacement of permanent employment with contract-based arrangements that do not comply with minimum wage regulation. This state of precarity is heightened because of a number of profit maximising strategies that platform intermediaries resort to. For example: reclassifying workers as contractors to avoid welfare support and social wage payouts (Uber), to sending wage rates into a tail spin by forcing workers to engage in reverse-bidding to obtain gigs (Taskrabbit), and restricting workers’ rights to unionise (Amazon).<sup>4</sup> Feminist scholars highlight how women’s unpaid care work burdens tend to get invisibilised in this context, where the loss of secure employment is accompanied by a retreat of the welfare state.<sup>5</sup> **The emerging digital economy is changing the world of work in fundamental ways – work is getting atomised, worker rights are being undermined, and unpaid work is obscured by the desocialisation of the economy and governance systems.**

In addition, platformisation of informal sectors of the economy which are already feminised, such as domestic work, tends to compromise the rights of women workers. For example, the uberisation of domestic work – contracting out domestic work in short assignments – is expanding at exponential rates.<sup>6</sup> This is likely to emerge as an issue of special concern to many developing countries, further eroding women workers’ economic security and ability to unionise.

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2 <https://www.oecd.org/internet/Digital-Economy-Ministerial-Declaration-2016.pdf>

3 FES (2017), Digital Labour Markets in the Platform Economy, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/wiso/13164.pdf>

4 Hill, S. (2016). The California Challenge How (not) to regulate disruptive business models. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). [http://www4.fh-swf.de/media/downloads/meschedestandort/fachtagung\\_industrie\\_4\\_0/2016\\_6/downloads\\_unterlagen/03\\_Steven\\_Hill\\_FINAL\\_ENGL\\_print.pdf](http://www4.fh-swf.de/media/downloads/meschedestandort/fachtagung_industrie_4_0/2016_6/downloads_unterlagen/03_Steven_Hill_FINAL_ENGL_print.pdf)

5 Hill, S. (2016). The California Challenge How (not) to regulate disruptive business models. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). [http://www4.fh-swf.de/media/downloads/meschedestandort/fachtagung\\_industrie\\_4\\_0/2016\\_6/downloads\\_unterlagen/03\\_Steven\\_Hill\\_FINAL\\_ENGL\\_print.pdf](http://www4.fh-swf.de/media/downloads/meschedestandort/fachtagung_industrie_4_0/2016_6/downloads_unterlagen/03_Steven_Hill_FINAL_ENGL_print.pdf)

6 Hunt, A. (2016, 14 September). What the 'Uber-isation' of domestic work means for women. *Development Progress*. [www.developmentprogress.org/blog/2016/09/15/what-uber-isation-domestic-work-means-women](http://www.developmentprogress.org/blog/2016/09/15/what-uber-isation-domestic-work-means-women)

### **The gendered hierarchies of labour in the unequal digital economy:**

The popular myth of the digital economy is that it is one which equalises economic opportunity, as the internet enables the emergence of a new culture of work and economic transactions where geographic boundaries do not matter at all. However, what is left unsaid is that this entire edifice rests upon a transnational labour hierarchy that is geographically segregated, racialised and gendered.<sup>7</sup> It is only knowledge workers (mostly, male) from advanced economies who have access to a mobile and distributed workplace that they can access from anywhere. They are supported by IT support service workers and laborers from micro-chip factories from emerging economies, and miners engaged in environmentally destructive rare earth production in new age colonies in the global South – in abysmal working conditions. In the transnational labour chains of the network age, knowledge workers in advanced economies are outsourcing their care work to migrant women workers from poorer countries. APWLD's research has found that countries in Asia that rank highest on ITU's ICT Development Index have the highest in-flow of migrant women domestic workers in the region.<sup>8</sup> The network economy thus reproduces older inequalities, entrenching an exploitative hierarchy that is distinctly gendered.

### **The risks to women's privacy, personal autonomy and socio-economic rights in the age of the 'network-data' complex:**

In the data economy, extensive surveillance of individual users of technologies, by corporations, is the norm. Companies build user profiles based on mining the intimate details of users' private lives and sell this information to advertisers and market research agencies. There is no part of life that is exempt from this surveillance apparatus – even bodily functions are mined to create 'body as information models' and sexual preferences and gender identities are tracked. For example: consider the proliferation of 'menstruation management' apps that rely user data to medical research agencies, or Facebook's move to allow users to pick from over 50 gender identities on its platform as part of enhancing the sophistication of its categorisation and sorting mechanisms. The terms of service on these platforms are quite unclear about what type of re-use the data thus collected are put to, opening up a number of risks for users' informational and physical privacy and personal autonomy.

More worrisome is the collaboration of states with online platforms to track their citizens – what is known as the rise of the 'network-data' complex – for espionage; and as part of the shift to building big data-based decision-making systems that compensate for the inadequacies of traditional statistical agencies. Considering that governments of developing countries do not have the technological wherewithal to manage data and legacy systems are inadequate, governance functions are usurped by corporations to ostensibly 'support' governments in data-based decision making. In this switchover, women's situated knowledges and citizenship praxis are devalued, and data is seen

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7 Chen, Y. (2014). Production Cultures and Differentiations of Digital Labour. *TripleC*, Vol 12, No 2. [www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/547/626#ref62](http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/547/626#ref62)

8 Presentation by Trimita Chakma, APWLD at the Expert Group Meeting on e-government and gender equality convened by UN ESCAP in October 2016.

as a priori truth<sup>9</sup> and ‘data-based rationalities’ overvalourised. The privatization of core governance functions suggests a loss of civic political rights for women, rendering the most marginalised women illegible to the state apparatus.

**The threats to women’s rights posed by an unregulated digital economy:**

In the current context, where digital trade is dominated by a few countries from the global North, the attempt has been to use WTO talks and plurilateral trade agreements to browbeat developing country governments into accepting the status-quo by agreeing not to tax e-commerce, and to push for free trans-border data flows, even when it undermines privacy and data security of citizens in developing countries. Evidently, these arrangements impede the realisation of economic and social rights for the world’s most marginalised women – as tax revenues foregone on e-commerce eat into potential funds for welfare funding for developing economies, and the inability to institute mandatory data localisation of sensitive data opens up exploitation of people, by TNCs.

This ‘Wild West’ situation in digital trade is exacerbated by the lack of a democratic, global framework on Internet related public policies. Today, large swathes of the Internet are controlled by US-based companies (major search engines, social media and social networking platforms). There are two important consequences of this. First, there is no way these Internet corporations can be brought to book for rights violations in jurisdictions outside the US. This has proved to be a major problem, especially with respect to fixing the responsibility of internet intermediaries in instances of online violence against women. Internet platforms were recently pulled up by the Indian supreme court for featuring ads in violation of the 1994 law banning prenatal gender testing (widely prevalent in a country where there is male-preference and sex-selective abortions result in a highly skewed sex ratio in many parts of the country). Second, the Internet has become a new channel for unregulated trans-border financial flows that fuel the illegal economy, in particular human trafficking.

**If the women’s rights and gender equality agenda is to be meaningfully furthered, the CSW must take cognizance of the digital economy and its restructuring of rules and norms governing the world of work.**

**It must call for a resocialisation of public policies that concern the economy - covering issues pertaining to massive shrinking of low-skilled jobs due to automation, ethics of algorithms and Artificial Intelligence, digital trade and unregulated trans-border data flows, and their gendered underpinnings.**

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9 Kitchin, R. (2014, 10 July). Big Data, new epistemologies and paradigm shifts. *Sage Journals*.  
[www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053951714528481](http://www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053951714528481)