

Feminist Pathways to Digital Transformation Post-Pandemic – Some Considerations for BRICS

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It is widely believed that digital technologies can – if suitably deployed – contribute to post-pandemic recovery, creating the much needed impetus for economic growth.

The future is digital, no doubt.

But what is of concern is that of the BRICS countries, only China features in the top 10 countries in [the data economy](#). The rest of BRICS is way behind.

The connectivity divide continues to be gendered in countries like India and South Africaⁱ and this means women's and girls' access to information, networking, opportunities, self-development are impacted negatively. Further, there are urban-rural divides. The digital divide also mirrors the divide in education, income earning opportunities and age. This means the connectivity problem cannot fix everything and gender equality in the digital society requires a societal preparedness and policy commitment towards core public investments for healthy societies, where education is a fundamental right and where digital engagement creates critically thinking citizens.

Women have been the hardest hit by the economic shocks of the global pandemic, including in the BRICS countries, concentrated as they are in low-paid, unprotected jobs, and disproportionately affected by the withdrawal of public investments in social care infrastructure.ⁱⁱ This situation is only going to worsen, as the acceleration of AI-induced automationⁱⁱⁱ in traditional manufacturing and administration jobs dominated by women leads to more job losses in the formal sector and a reversal of hard won gains in pay and status.^{iv} Meanwhile, women in small agriculture and informal sector employment (e.g. micro-retail) are also likely to be excluded from or adversely affected by the platformisation of value chains.

Suggestions

1. Unemployment rates have been on the rise in the BRICS countries since 2014, with the increase being larger for women^v. Compared to developed countries, in which the process of creating

Industry 4.0 was launched earlier and aimed at achieving marketing and social results, BRICS countries face institutional and financial barriers.^{vi} There is an immediate need to build digital infrastructure and encourage digitalisation in core sectors that adds value to the [aggregate economy](#) in terms of innovation and production of real goods and services. This will create a positive spiral for the employment of women.

2. BRICS countries also need to strengthen rural digital infrastructure. Publicly funded e-commerce market places can be a viable alternative for women traders, entrepreneurs and artisans, offering them an alternative to private e-commerce that tends to be exploitative. Public goods and standards, like digital payment standards, are vital for the local economy and small businesses that women dominate.

3. Policy support for new platform models driven by women's cooperatives in sectors like farm to table, on-demand urban services that are run by women's organisations and micro businesses can go a long way in rebooting local economies.

4. Women's participation in the digital economy is predicated on an ecosystem approach. Access to high quality connectivity and well-publicised programmes for digital skills are a starting point, but a whole host of public policy interventions – reskilling of women who lose their jobs to automation; enterprise development; bank credit that is linked to digitisation of small businesses; grants for social intermediaries supporting women platform workers; preferential procurement policies to encourage women's collectives, producer organisations and cooperatives; open data policies to benefit women's tech startups; etc., are needed to provide an impetus to women's participation in the digital economy.

5. The BRICS bank can establish a digital empowerment fund with innovative schemes. One such example is of national tech-accelerators to catalyse linkages between women producers/farmers and women-led tech start-ups.

6. The BRICS bloc also needs to forge collaborations for AI innovations in the public sector – in health, energy transportation etc. – to find solutions to the socialisation of care and expand effective public provisioning of services that have positive impacts for women's social and economic empowerment.

7. The adoption by the BRICS countries of data technologies for welfare and public service delivery is of course welcome, but we do need greater transparency and accountability for the use of AI technologies in government decision making so that vulnerable women's privacy is safeguarded.

8. Changes to labour laws are urgently needed to ensure that women in digitally delivered services/freelancers, women in digitally mediated employment and in digital manufacturing industries are guaranteed a labour protection floor.

The lowest segments of the platform economy are feminised – they include the women farmers who keep up the supply of vegetables to all the grocery platforms supplying to cities, women warehouse assistants who work without basic restroom breaks, women who do dehumanisingly monotonous work in data centres, women domestic helps on on-demand platforms. These women must have fundamental workers' rights; an adequate living wage, maternity benefits, limits on hours of work and safe and healthy workplaces. The misclassification of platform workers continues to be a huge problem in policies and platform workers tend to fall between the stools. This needs to change and BRICS countries need to lead the way, considering that the share of the digital economy in these countries is growing^{vii}.

9. The final demand women have is for corporate regulation and corporate taxation. The age of platforms has exacerbated the governance deficit in respect of transnational corporations. During the pandemic, many women who worked for urban platforms have lost their jobs – uprooted and banished to the rural hinterlands – in India and South Africa. Platform companies have done very little for worker's social security.

Unless we can creatively use taxation including of Big Tech companies, governments will be cash strapped to invest in social policy. The face of extreme poverty is unequivocally female, and we do need a new social contract to reverse this reality and create a gender just world.

- i <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf>
- ii https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/genericdocument/wcms_748428.pdf
- iii <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/15797.pdf>
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- v https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_636205.pdf
- vi <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/iscde-19/125924651>
- vii <https://financialtribune.com/articles/world-economy/84069/brics-prioritizing-digital-economy>