

# **Recommendations made by IT for Change to NITI Aayog**

COVID-19: Impact on Women and Girls

Focus on How Digital Economy and Society can be Geared  
Towards Gender Equality

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#### Focus on How Digital Economy and Society can be Geared Towards Gender Equality

##### The issues

There exists a huge opportunity to shape the ways forward for gender equality and women's empowerment at this juncture, with the possibility to pause and rethink strategies and account for historical learnings. We stand at a crossroads, with a paradigmatic shift towards a digital society and economy. This is the moment to invest in gender-responsive design and the development of appropriate public digital and data infrastructure for critical economic sectors and delivery of essential public services, to ensure that women are not left out in the post-COVID recovery map we chart. From this standpoint, we would like to suggest the following specific components be taken up as part of the NITI Aayog response to the current situation.

##### Recommendations

#### **A. Promoting women's livelihoods in the context of digitalizing value chains**

The new value chains of the economy are predicated on platforms and their building blocks – data and artificial intelligence (AI). The lockdown has accelerated the digitalization and datafication of critical sectors of the economy such as retail commerce and agriculture. E-commerce companies have seen an opportunity to take over and re-engineer retail supply chains end-to-end in the pandemic, edging out small retailers and vendors. In the past few months, we saw Big E-comm go out on a limb to capture 'kirana' stores and their neighborhood networks that constitute over [90% of the \\$44 billion](#) of fast-moving consumer goods sold in India each year. Jiomart's hyperlocal grocery service, Amazon's 'Local shops on Amazon' and Flipkart's 'Buyzones' programs are signifiers of this trend. Similarly, platforms such as Zomato and Flipkart are also getting into the business of moving upstream into the supply chains, exploring opportunities to intensify the corporatization of direct farm procurement.

In this huge structural transformation that the last mile of retail commerce is going through, women informal workers in the marketplace – the push cart vendor, vegetable seller, *kirana* store owner – as well as women farmers, may become a relic of the past, unless the imminent e-commerce rules allow

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<sup>1</sup> IT for Change contributed this input – based on our ongoing project, 'Centering Women in India's Digitalising Economy', supported by the EU – to a report for the NITI Aayog prepared by a group of organizations working for gender equality and women's empowerment.

a just playing field. The current design of the platform economy, however, does not prioritize women and other small economic actors. On the contrary, emerging anti-competitive developments in the economy seem to drive a centralization of value.

New platform value chains based on huge corporate models skew the market, creating undesirable dependencies and transferring value upstream.

**In the immediate term, the following sets of actions may be important in this regard:**

**1. Making the platform economy work for women's enterprises.** Innovations through digital supply chains can enable women's cooperatives and producer organizations to realize sustainable livelihoods. This requires urgent public investment in supply chain logistics and public digital infrastructure (cloud and analytics, for example) and simultaneous efforts to strengthen and digitally enable women's enterprises (farm and non-farm). Federated platform business models can be piloted through a special fund and state governments incentivized to take on such pilots.

**2. Promoting women FPOS' participation in e-NAM public marketplace for farmers.** The central government's decision permitting farmers to directly sell their produce on e-NAM from selected warehouses or premises of Farmer Producer Organizations without taking their produce to *mandis* in the lockdown period is a good move. To ensure that small and marginal women farmers gain from this proposal, the government should introduce a public procurement sourcing program from e-NAM, with a specific quota for small and marginal women farmers. The features of e-NAM could be expanded to also link it to input credit and farm advisory services, as many agricultural experts have observed how the lack of access to farm extension services was a critical problem in the lockdown, especially for women farmers.

**3. Using data from e-NAM and Agristack to support farm innovations for women farmers.** Transactions data from the e-NAM public marketplace could feed into the NITI Aayog Agristack, the public data infrastructure being created for encouraging innovations that use farmer/farm data to address longstanding problems of Indian agriculture. The goal of Agristack needs to be geared to support and catalyze data modeling that transforms agricultural incomes of small and marginal holders. Smart supply chains that put 'small' in the center through integrated farm enterprise development support can go a long way in creating regenerative agro-economies.

**4. Promoting the on-boarding of women enterprises on the Government eMarketplace (GeM).** The Commerce Ministry's [Saras Collection initiative](#) to onboard the products created by rural women's self-help groups on the GeM public procurement must be expanded to include more diverse

categories of products (beyond handicrafts; handloom and textiles; office accessories; grocery and pantry; and personal care and hygiene) and the application process simplified (introduction of local languages, notification about processing of RFPs etc.). A key informant interview with SEWA conducted by the IT for Change team in May 2020 revealed that women's cooperatives and women's enterprises would benefit significantly if the GeM marketplace had a quota to source services from women's cooperatives (for example, sourcing housekeeping and sanitation services from a domestic workers' cooperative instead of through a third party contractor). State Rural Livelihoods Mission budgets could be used to support enterprise development in these areas.

## **B. Creating a valuable public data backbone for ensuring effective public service delivery**

From integrated disease surveillance to support for migrant workers, the COVID-19 lockdown has demonstrated the urgent imperative to invest in an integrated, interoperable public data backbone for the country that can aid effective last-mile public service delivery. The National Data Analytics Platform (NDAP) for India – an initiative to make data sets across ministries available – is a laudable initiative, with considerable potential for addressing issues across silos and in their actual interconnectedness. The process of building and implementing this initiative needs to be gender-responsive and engage civil society organizations committed to working on women's rights. Public data sets need accountable and people-centric governance frameworks and must be rooted in individual and group privacy rights and ensure that the benefits of any data commons privilege the social and public value for gender equality.

### **In the immediate term, the following actions are needed in this regard:**

1. The Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019 pending before Parliament must be passed – with loopholes in the bill addressed to protect and promote the fundamental rights of all citizens in the country.
2. Sector-specific data protection guidelines must be enacted for the various data projects that are adjacent to NDAP, along with data access and use conditionalities in order to prevent unaccountable surveillance and corporate capture. For instance, NITI Aayog's National Health Stack and the framework that it provides for the creation of a national health registry – a master health data base for the country, as a whole. Without binding sectoral data protection guidelines for the health sector, such a database can render women and individuals in stigmatized locations at high risk of personal harm. Further, without specific use conditionalities and public interest norms governing private access to the health data commons, the National Health Stack may end up as yet another instance of the government spending valuable public funds to create a free-for-all data commons that private

developers and Big Tech companies capture/enclose. The [capture of public value by Amazon in its partnership with the National Health Service in the UK](#) should serve as a timely warning about the risks of building public health data infrastructure without appropriate use and licensing safeguards and partnership governance mechanisms for all of us.

3. While datafication can bring much-needed efficiencies, it is not a magic wand that can address historical flaws and structural exclusions. Institutional reform must accompany digital innovations. The digitalization of the PDS system to achieve complete portability of food ration entitlements through the "one nation, one ration card" scheme will work only if some basic loopholes are fixed. Digitalization of PDS records and an interoperable data backbone for PDS can be beneficial only if food ration entitlements are universalized. Also, the idea of Aadhaar-enabled biometric authentication at the PoS for pick-up of food rations needs to be done away with, [not just for the health risks it poses, but also the authentication errors](#).

4. Evidence on the efficacy of Direct Benefit Transfers as an instrument of COVID-19 relief has been mixed and the approach seems to have worked in some pockets and for certain schemes. While some quick-and-dirty survey reports have found that DBT transfers of farm subsidies under the PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi Scheme (PM-KISAN) have reached the right beneficiary in certain pockets in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, evidence gathered by grassroots women's organizations suggests that the DBTs directed to Jan Dhan accounts have not worked well. This needs closer investigation and appropriate course corrections.

### **C. Women's right to dignity, privacy, safety and mobility**

Women's right to equal participation pertains to both physical and cyber spaces. Women's safety online needs a firm commitment, based on principles of equality, dignity and bodily integrity/ privacy. Amendments are needed to bring the law up to speed to recognize that the online is an intrinsic part of women's human rights – right to public participation, information and citizenship, in its widest sense. Sexism and misogyny online need to be tackled through deep cultural change that encourages openness, curiosity and respect, in formal and non-formal educational processes. Technology-enabled pedagogies are highly useful to tackle patriarchal value systems and promote a spirit of self-inquiry and mutual respect among young people.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, informal women workers, particularly in domestic work, face excessive and disproportionate surveillance, including coercion to install contact tracing apps. The proposed Data Protection Bill needs to incorporate stronger protections for worker rights. The empowerment of

women in the digital age requires a right to internet access that translates into a universal data access program.