

Promoting Digital Justice - Feminist Frameworks

**IT for Change's input at
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A feminist perspective requires us to be attentive to gender hierarchies as well as to social differences and social power.

The most important lesson in the field is that inclusion into digital society and economy may be adverse.

What is adverse inclusion? One may be seemingly part of the benefits ecosystem, but when this comes with punishingly high costs, it's adverse inclusion. Take the case of having access to social media but being victimized by trolling, or being part of national ID systems or a health ID program only to be exploited by unregulated fintech companies, or if you are a small farmer or a cooperative contributing to the common data spaces or data exchange and you are receiving nothing, but agri-tech companies are happily using your data for profits. These are instances of adverse inclusion.

If we want meaningful inclusion, then we need to think of what can enable greater bargaining power for those who are less powerful in society. We are not talking just about opportunities, but a shift in social power.

That is why inclusion is meaningful only when it is empowering.

1. Today we are experiencing what is called the connectivity paradox.

Even though more people are connected to the internet, only those who have the resources to make productive use of the internet are genuinely benefiting. This means digital inequality is a complex problem — meaningful connectivity is important, but not enough. We need to tackle other antecedents of social and economic power. You may see vegetable vendors in India using UPI, but street vendors are not getting richer.

A holistic, society-wide approach to digital inclusion means a multilayered approach. Technological innovation needs to be correlated with productive forces at global, national, and local levels.

Today, while some nations, and some interests within nations, are able to harness the benefits of these innovations, others are not.

¹ Know more about [IT for Change's](#) participation at the WSIS+20 Forum High-Level Event 2024 [here](#).

The transformative potential of information societies is yet to contribute to human freedom and development. So, the first principle in the feminist playbook is that we need to be sure that our interventions can contribute to a reduction of inequality.

2. The data and AI regime has led to adverse inclusion that is worrisome. A peasant or a fisherperson may not be aware, but may already be datafied.

The individualism of gadget centrality of tech diffusion has converted access to benefits of data into a product mode; not only are we passive consumers, but we are also—as is famously said—the product. Indigenous people, peasants, cities, and many collectives have challenged the idea that data is solely individual. Indeed, some facets of data are individual and private, but the aggregate collective data that holds societal insight is a collective wealth: it is part of the social commons.

So, the second principle here is that empowering inclusion enables local knowledge to be leveraged for collective well-being. Privileging local knowledge, the commons, and collective well-being is foundational for achieving gender equality.

3. There is also a need to look at the digital as a connectivity policy, and platform and data policy as vital to public law.

There is a quality of the digital that is paradigmatic or life-changing. The digital reorders society, it is the new infrastructure of social organization.

This is why public policy for affirmative action is vital. In India, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) ruled that the internet is an experience good, and so, net neutrality is crucial; we cannot have one internet for the poor and one for the rich.

Policies at the subnational level in India, in the state of Kerala, have enabled local cooperative banks working with farmers to plug into a larger, state-wide platform. The Kerala Food Platform supports local producer organizations to aggregate and market their produce. The public ecommerce and distribution backbone is a good example of public-community innovation. The state can provision public infrastructures like platforms and cloud, and set the rules for benefit sharing. India's non-personal data commons approach, advanced in the idea of 'community data' is a useful concept. The aggregate data commons needs to be managed with embedded data stewardship, somewhat similar to the EU data commons but with safeguards against freeriding. This is vital for small actors in the economy, most of whom are women.

The third principle from the feminist playbook therefore is that the state is not just a welfare provider, but a catalyst for digital transformation. The state also does allocation, distribution, and redistribution. This is key.

4. Finally, data and AI.

We have been long arguing about how algorithms must have diversity and representation. But representational diversity is not enough. Even if algorithms have diversity of input, we may not see this result in representational justice because the ecosystem in which algorithms operate needs a social approach—an approach that is not about add and stir, but one that can achieve epistemic justice. We do not want to see recidivism algorithms push more younger people from marginalized communities into incarceration. We need to use AI as a means to make decisions that break traditional social hierarchies.

The fourth principle here, that I want to conclude with, is therefore, a radical politics of inclusion where the structural-infrastructural power of AI is deployed to change the power equations in the social ecosystem.