

The IPEF Upskilling Initiative for Women and Girls – A Backgrounder about Critical Feminist Concerns

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In May 2022, the Biden Administration launched the [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity \(IPEF\)](#) with Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam – which appears to be the template for other US agreements with the Americas, Kenya, and Taiwan, so far. Further, in September 2022, the US Department of Commerce announced the [IPEF Upskilling Initiative](#), primarily for women and girls, in support of the objectives of the IPEF. The Initiative promises digital en-skilling for 7 million women and girls in emerging and middle-income economies. Four domains for digital en-skilling have been identified:

- Training in fields such as data science, cyber-security, AI, and robotics
- A digital toolkit for female small business owners
- Supporting digital literacy and entrepreneurship training for rural girls and women
- Training for digital content creation to empower girls through reading apps

By 2032, 14 US companies – Amazon Web Services, American Tower, Apple, Cisco, Dell, Edelman, Google, HP, IBM, Mastercard, Microsoft, PayPal, Salesforce, and Visa – will “each provide 500,000 or more upskilling opportunities that use digital tools for women and girls in IPEF emerging economies and middle-income partners”.

Some key concerns are discussed below:

The Initiative clearly represents the US government’s agenda to further the dominance and control of the digital economy by its digital behemoths. Promoting “training and education opportunities (for women and girls) that use digital tools” is an overt reference to marketing of products of US companies in the name of en-skilling. The attempt here to introduce women and girls to corporate-controlled platform environments or apps is by no measure literacy or education in critical skills or learning that nurtures innovation capacity.

By “facilitating training” of women to “enable IPEF partners to achieve high-standard commitments” for the “promotion of cross-border data flows”, the Initiative unabashedly instrumentalises capacity building of women and girls as a route to entrench the data power of US Big Tech. There is evidently no

high-standard commitment to ensure deepening of local skills and capacity in the training designed by the participating corporate partners.

[Research by the ILO](#) highlights how highly educated women from developing countries in cross-border data and AI services are concentrated in low-skill segments and comprise the cheap labour for emerging digital value chains characterised by precarity and drudgery. These are value chains controlled by the very companies who will provide “en-skillment” under the Initiative. (For instance, [women from India who are engaged in microwork](#) for Amazon Mechanical Turk work under extremely exploitative conditions.) The Initiative’s commitment to “addressing inequities in labour force participation, pay, and access to financial services” thus rings hollow. What is likely is the adverse incorporation of women into an exploitative international digital economic order controlled by large platform companies.

Also, integration into digital services value chains controlled by Big Tech lead firms does not necessarily lead to economic empowerment for women entrepreneurs. Invariably, small and marginal enterprises of women face steep commissions on e-commerce platforms that makes it non-viable for them. The “entrepreneurship training for rural girls and women” through a “comprehensive digital toolkit” is simply no solution for gender-inclusive marketplaces.

The discouraging reality of the gender digital divide and the lack of access to devices, exacerbated by feminization of poverty and precarity during the pandemic suggests that promotion of “reading apps to enhance girls’ “literacy” and “digital content creation” will not serve the contextual needs of the majority of girls in developing countries. The learning loss for girls all over the world cannot be redeemed by a booming ed-tech industry that [threatens](#) the very ethos of education as a public good.

The Upskilling Initiative is a blatant case of corporate opportunism, de-contextualised interventions in the name of gender equality, and abject neglect of the human rights of girls and women. It is also not clear how the training commitments by participating companies will be rolled out in actual terms and what real investments will accrue in the local context for women and girls. For instance, Google already has an [online MOOC](#) on digital marketing and e-commerce that it offers on Coursera for USD 300. CISCO and Salesforce offer online courses without cost. Will this meet its IPEF Upskilling Initiative commitments?

The Initiative’s ambition to strengthen the region’s “economic resilience, equity and inclusion, and sustainability cannot be achieved by its purported aim to “grow the region’s middle class and expand export opportunities for US goods and services and regional trade and investment”. “Bolstering US private sector engagement” through Big Tech and its largesse cannot be a simplistic congruence of gains – “long-term dividends for companies and workers”, as has been articulated by the Initiative.

Such equivalences negate the skewed nature of the digital economy controlled by a handful of lead US firms and its extraordinary impulse for hyper-consumption and worker exploitation.

Skill training measures cannot automatically translate into better work opportunities in local digital economies without structural conditions that support a systemic shift. Only through concrete measures to build domestic data and digital industrial capacities, regulate Big Tech's market excesses and pursue affirmative policies can developing countries carve out autonomous pathways to digital transformation and achieve gender-inclusive outcomes in the labour market.

Reading along with IPEF's formula in [Pillar 1](#) for the development of the digital economy, the intent of the Upskilling Initiative to legitimise a path for the hyper-liberalisation of digital trade through "cross-border data flows" is amply clear. IPEF's approach to data flows – peddled by the US and other big powers in trade negotiations – argues that technical fixes to data privacy and security can enhance "trust and confidence in the digital economy". This insidious agenda occludes the fact that inclusive digital trade requires data sovereignty. For inclusive outcomes, data policy measures for localisation and protection from harms are needed in the market access of transnational corporations.

Conditionalities or restrictions on the operations of transnational agri-tech platforms – such as controls on their acquisition of agricultural land – may be necessary to preserve [the interests of women smallholder and marginal farmers](#) in nascent digital agri-value chains. Data localisation measures would also be necessary for [effective oversight](#) to ensure that transnational e-commerce companies are not adopting predatory or anti-competitive measures on their platform marketplaces and are complying with affirmative action requirements – such as preferential scoring guidelines that may be recommended in search results for local, women-owned MSMEs. Access to data is also paramount for policymakers and public agencies tasked with upkeep of baseline functions -- such as for tax assessments, payment regulation, or investigation of labour disputes. Without data sovereignty, countries cannot aspire to autonomous digital infrastructures in [core public service sectors](#), such as health and education, that are integral to citizen welfare in general, and women's wellbeing in particular.

The Upskilling Initiative, thus, detracts attention from the realpolitik of data in the digital economy and the market power of Big Tech underpinning the neoliberal trade paradigm. Women's trust and confidence in the digital economy, their access to online information and unfettered participation in digital trade requires more than en-skilment. It needs investment in infrastructure and institutional capabilities for productive and gender-transformative domestic digitalization, and concerted action globally to eliminate economic and development injustice in the digital economy. Women do not want to be accommodated into a status-quoist unequal digital future controlled by a few powerful

corporations from a handful of countries. They need the guarantees of a context-responsive, rights-based digital economic framework that they can shape, control, and be part of in the here and now.