

UN Women

Expert Group Meeting

Sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 64)

'Beijing +25: Current context, emerging issues and prospects for gender equality and women's rights'

New York, New York

25-26 September 2019

A feminist manifesto for digitality: Issues in the frame

Expert paper prepared by:

Anita Gurumurthy*

IT for Change, India

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

1. The intelligence that feminist wisdom must confront

As an ever expanding universe of data and its constituent algorithmic assemblages recraft the fierce new world – the digital revolution is not what it was even a decade ago. Feminists must now contend with a new architecture of the space of flows arising from the datafication of social interactions and the internet of things (IoT) – cameras and other sentient gadgets that watch and sense, listen and reply. In its current orbit, the digital revolution’s impulse is to drive globalised capitalism onto a new frontier of value creation and distribution.

AI and machine learning underpin this new path of capitalism, integrating the might of finance with intelligent global value chains. Digital social organisation thus needs to be understood by feminism as a new epoch in capitalism – a paradigm shift where globalisation and financialisation intertwine with intelligencification (the restructuring of social and economic processes through data-based digital intelligence).

A skyrocketing economic inequality confronts the development agenda today, one that directly impinges on gender equity. At first glance, trends captured by the Gender Inequality Index (GII) from the mid 1990s to 2017 – the period of increasing digitalisation of the world economy – seem to indicate advancements in terms of gender equality, with few case-specific exceptions. But a deeper reading, one that cross-references data on gross domestic product (GDP) per capita with GII ranking, shows that countries with the lowest levels of gender equality are also among the poorest in terms of GDP. In other words, in the past couple of decades that have seen the Internet revolution and its high promise for development, the most unequal countries for women seem to be in the developing world.¹

Clearly, the ‘digital’ as the new techno-paradigm seems to be colinear with a deeper, disconcerting trend for gender justice, especially in the developing world. Take the case of China. Even as the country may have risen to the top of the heap in the digital economy, intra-country inequality has been worsening, with a slide-back in gains previously made in women’s economic and political participation.²

At the centre of the debate on inequality is the new transnational corporation, the ‘superstar’ firm with the wherewithal to extract and control digital intelligence. Intelligencification in the global economy proceeds from two ends. One where digital companies crossover into core economic sectors. Alibaba acquired China’s leading milk importer in 2018 and set up a blockchain based system between New Zealand and China in 2019, branching out into agriculture and dairy. Similarly, Google has entered the pharma industry (Google’s pharmaceutical division happens to be led by the former head of GlaxoSmithKline’s global vaccine business). From the other side, traditional companies – giants in traditional economic sectors – have sought to pool their data advantage, as for instance Bayer’s acquisition of Monsanto, aimed to expanding their data footprint, and thereby, control over input markets. The age of intelligence is thus proving to be the age of centralisation, consolidation and monopolisation of the market economy through what is popularly referred to as the platform business model.

¹<https://dawnnet.org/publication/gender-blindness-and-the-annulment-of-the-development-contract/>

²<https://www.caixinglobal.com/2018-12-19/why-china-is-getting-worse-for-women-101361101.html>

Platforms are critical digital infrastructures that serve as new ecosystems for social and economic interactions, fostering connections between producers, consumers, suppliers, workers and even IoT devices, optimising data of these member nodes to extract digital intelligence for market power. The success of platform owners is predicated on the ability to lock in actors into these ecosystems so that more and more data can be extracted. The model is completely pivoted on angel investors and venture capitalists willing to support years of cash burn before a firm is able to attract a significant base of users, attain a monopolistic position, and then monetise its user data. As the response to the Uber IPO demonstrates, public equity markets are hesitant to embrace this model enthusiastically. It is the likes of private equity funds such as Softbank's vision fund – whose investment portfolio of over \$70 billion is primarily with futuristic technology companies – that are able to underwrite this model.³

Seven of the world's top eight companies by market capitalisation are those which use platform-based business models. The rise of these platform superstars has coincided with a steady decline in the share of labour in value added.⁴

The economic geography of this emerging digitalised economic order indicates the potential rise of a new bi-polar world – with the US and China as the twin hegemons. As UNCTAD's Digital Economy Report 2019 highlights, these two countries account for 90 percent of the market capitalisation value of the world's 70 largest digital platforms. The rest of the world, especially Africa and Latin America, are trailing far behind, and have negligible control over global production decisions and transnational capital income.⁵

It is vital that feminist thinking and action for the twenty-first century correspond to the digital epoch and its specific socio-political norms and structures.

2. The digital restructuring of sociality: Key concerns for feminist politics

a. Feminisation and precarity in the digital economy

The material labour that underpins digital capitalism is feminised, racialised and globalised. From the unregulated mining of rare earth minerals in Africa, to the mobile chip factories in China that make phones, women from the Global South service the digital economy at huge risks to their health. On-demand labour platforms also reflect a gendered and racialised subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable. Across the board, labour is feminised, “made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day”.⁶

³<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/07/uber-wework-and-slack-public-valuations-show-softbank-vision-flaw.html>

⁴https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/tdr2018_en.pdf , pp 57 (pp 85 of PDF)

⁵<https://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=2466> , pp xvi (pp 17 of PDF)

⁶Donna Haraway, cited in <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1294194>

Platform models are also reorganising agriculture. Smart farming or precision agriculture threatens the household livelihoods backbone carefully managed by women over the centuries, across the countries of the Global South. E-commerce platforms and their forays into upstream aspects of agricultural supply chains (such as the acquisition of dairy farms in New Zealand by Alibaba) and the investments of venture capital wings of giant agri-business companies into digital platforms for small-size farms (such as the investments of ChemChina/Syngenta in integrated agro-inputs and finance platforms for smallholder farmers in Africa) are a route to end-to-end monopolisation of cross-border agricultural supply chains for farm-to-fork consolidation. They are likely to decimate locally bounded agricultural economies, thereby affecting subsistence farming, devaluing food security and ripping apart local agricultural cosmologies.⁷

In the ongoing transition to intelligent automation in traditional industries, hard won gains in closing gender gaps in pay and status are expected to slide back because of widespread technology-induced job displacement.

b. Digital sociality and gender discourses

In the neoliberal, quasi-publics of social media and social networking platforms, techno-design focuses on locking in user attention and maximising eyeballs/content views. The profits of platform owners are dependent on their ability to draw users, hook them to the platform, mine user behavioural data and game user engagement with content. Image-based self-documentation cultures that encourage self-disclosure and the prioritisation of click-bait content are, thus, by-products of the imbrication of the digitally-mediated public sphere in capitalism. Emerging new media cultures have significant implications for the everyday operations of gender power. Selfies and evaluative photo commentary that are characteristic of self-documentation trends, while holding the potential to further women's sexual expression, are nevertheless entrenched in an androcentric visual culture that promotes hyper feminine female subjectivity. Studies of the 'Wanghong Lian' or internet celebrity cultures in China highlight how the act of self-representation is about neoliberal self-fashioning to fit into a particular dominant aesthetic of gender performativity,⁸ rather than the self-discovery of a truly "female way of seeing".⁹

Techno-design that privileges virality also amplifies hegemonic narratives, naturalising sexism, misogyny and gender-based hate speech in digital sociality. Violence against women in the digitally-mediated public sphere has become distressingly ubiquitous – whether it be in intimate interactions, peer exchanges or public-political platforms. The real-world implication of this, in addition to the chilling effect on women's speech and expression, is a retreat into the private, a giving up of the right to engage in the public sphere. Cultures of hyper masculinity and vigilantism result in a regression to gender conservatism, with young

⁷<https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/1620/Gender%20%26%20e-commerce%20pre-final%20draft.pdf>

⁸ https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/v/transformeurope/publications/working_paper/wp/wp91/WP_91_Dippner_WEB_und_Druck.pdf

⁹<https://maifeminism.com/how-the-light-gets-in-notes-on-the-female-gaze-and-selfie-culture/>

women, the born digital generation, resorting to self-policing.¹⁰ Despite the many feminist counter publics and counter-narratives, public debate and deliberation are hostage to the sexist and misogynistic narratives that go viral. Recent research in Brazil on Facebook during the International Women's Day reveals that though there was more feminist content (in terms of volume), misogynistic content had greater reach.¹¹

Virality also means that only certain brands of political mobilisation and protest can benefit from the Internet, the ones that fit the neoliberal playbook of empowerment as a depoliticised 'choice politics' of freedom and enterprise. As activist Nadine Moawad observes in her caution to queer feminism in the South, the possibility for diverse sexual and gender profiles on social media platforms must be recognised as Silicon Valley's version of sexual liberation politics, an electronic continuation of credit card companies funding gay parades and pride marches.¹² Protest politics based on the critiques of colonialism and capitalism, eliding the grammar of neoliberal aesthetics, tend to be erased or pushed to the sides. And to be seen and heard, feminism seems to have little choice but to be co-opted into the contradictions of a profoundly sexist and privatised social media sphere. Just consider the fact that in order to be visible online, the Dakota Access pipeline protests, led by First Nations communities who were fighting against the proposed construction of an oil pipeline that would cross Native American land in 2016, had to hire a media company to manage their social media presence! In an Internet that is shaped by capitalism, the dominant politics is one of neoliberal multiculturalism. To have any relevance, the class contradictions of gender injustice need to be framed and packaged in the language of identitarian politics. This runs the risk of diluting stories of struggle into highly individualised narratives that erase the systemic issues at the root of gender-based exclusion, exploitation and expulsion.

c. Gendered citizenship and the surveillance state

Mass and targeted state surveillance today is based on several interdependent gendered, racialised, and sexualised modes¹³ that have profound implications for women's experiences of citizenship. Thanks to the digital surveillance net that the Chinese state has built in partnership with over 1000 AI companies, Uighur women's social media behaviour is tracked constantly, in a blatant violation of their cultural rights and right to family life. Indications of religious piety – such as photos of women in veils or the use of prayer terms – are marked as high-risk behaviour indicative of religious extremism/ethnic separatism. Women can also find themselves penalised for merely getting in touch with relatives who have been marked as 'dissidents' by the authorities.

Sexual minorities and gender non-confirming individuals also find themselves at risk of being subject to gender policing by the patriarchal state. In Malaysia, the national digital ID number assigned to individuals

¹⁰https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/1662/Born-Digital_Born-Free_Synthesis-Report%28DRAFT%29.pdf

¹¹<https://sur.conectas.org/en/are-we-going-to-feminise-the-internet/>

¹²<https://itforchange.net/e-vaw/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Opinion-piece-1.pdf>

¹³<https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/what-sexual-surveillance-and-why-does-it-matter>

is coded for birth sex, and individuals with gender dysphoria can be persecuted by the Sharia police if their gender expression does not match the dominant norm.¹⁴

Data surveillance also enables new forms of population management, extending the control that states have historically exercised over women's fertility and reproductive behaviour. In Latin America, SRHR activists have highlighted how states use social media surveillance to crackdown on feminist groups supporting women's access to safe abortion.¹⁵ In India, a few proposals have been floated in policy circles about linking the national citizen identification number to the mother and child tracking system maintained by public health clinics to deter sex-selective abortion.¹⁶ This could lead to blatant transgressions into the bodily privacy of women under the guise of 'public interest'.

3. Gender implications of the ongoing intelligencification of sociality

The intelligence economy encloses people, nature, and life worlds through a rapid 'dispossession by data'.¹⁷ It impinges on community autonomy, reorganising local production systems and annihilating the social memory and attendant diversity of socio-economic life (ways of being and doing in local knowledge cultures) on a scale and pace that is unprecedented. Debates on access and connectivity seem to reduce technological practices to individual efficacy, and sidestep analysis about this crucial link between participation and structures of choice in the digital context.

The datafication of affective labour (maintaining social ties, communication networks, the summum bonum of all those acts that contribute to reproducing sociality itself) and its expropriation for profits by platform owners has led social relations to becoming unfree.¹⁸ Facebook, for instance, determines the ways in which one can keep in touch with one's friends or express love and affection. This raises a whole new set of concerns about the normative and political endeavour of setting the limits of the market in digital sociality.

In the digitally-mediated public sphere, female individuation and free expression seem to be circumscribed by platform design that tends to reproduce dominant gender cultural norms and hierarchies. Rather than a gender-fluid cyborgian utopia where body is no longer destiny, the body becomes key to the data apparatus, in turn being redefined by the intelligence that rematerialises it, as deserving or undeserving of credit or social security, or as in the case of the Uighur women in China, to mark them as potential terrorists to be sent to a 're-education' camp.

¹⁴<https://egov4women.unescapsdd.org/files/documents/country-overviews-malaysia.pdf>

¹⁵<https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/FeministActionFrameworkOnDevelopmentAndDigitalTechnologies.pdf>

¹⁶<https://cis-india.org/internet-governance/blog/epw-engage-february-9-2019-data-infrastructures-inequities-why-does-reproductive-health-surveillance-india-need-urgent-attention>

¹⁷<https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/FeministActionFrameworkOnDevelopmentAndDigitalTechnologies.pdf>

¹⁸https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285639701_Affective_Labor_and_Feminist_Politics

The intelligence economy also has devastating impacts on the environment. Global data centre web servers, such as those operated by Google and Facebook, contribute to 2 percent of global greenhouse emissions, an amount equivalent to emissions generated by global aviation.¹⁹ Comparative studies of online and traditional retail suggest that in ‘last mile delivery’, online shoppers may be expending far more carbon per transaction than their in-store counterparts.²⁰ The food delivery sector has an enormous ecological footprint. As per a 2018 study,²¹ door-to-door food delivery in China accounted for nearly an eightfold jump in packaging waste in just two years, from 0.2 million tonnes (2015) to 1.5 million tonnes (2017). This has coincided with the exponential growth of the sector in the country, where the number of customers using food-delivery platforms has gone up from zero in 2009 (when the first delivery app (Ele.me) appeared) to nearly half the population of internet users (406 million), by the end of 2018.²² Toxic e-waste, the detritus of the network economy, has a global grey market that functions in flagrant violation of the Basel Convention.

The big picture is indeed bleak. But this is not the moment for paralysis or pessimism. Resistance to the dominant system is emerging, slowly, but surely. Across the political spectrum, Americans are eager to see the breaking up of Big Tech.²³ The Silicon Valley tech community has come out to protest against AI contracts of Big Tech with the military establishment of the US. The competition commission of the EU has taken bold steps in taxation of transnational digital corporations. And, in the past couple of years, trade justice, gender justice and labour justice movements have been coming together to protest the co-optation and subversion of women’s digital empowerment agenda in trade negotiations by the US and its allies.²⁴ There are also strong critiques against the corporate capture of the global multilateral system through partnerships, including in the name of digital cooperation.²⁵ In the quest for reclaiming a new feminist economics, alternative platform models are being explored in favour of a new ‘small is beautiful’ economy founded on a reverence for the living human labour of care, solidarity and social reciprocity and

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/25/server-data-centre-emissions-air-travel-web-google-facebook-greenhouse-gas>

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/sep/03/online-commerce-store-amazon-zappos-grocery-delivery-usps-carbon-emissions>

²¹ <https://www.deepdyve.com/lp/elsevier/packaging-waste-from-food-delivery-in-china-s-mega-cities-FWSKD1p1mK>

²² Forthcoming article, Julie Chen, *Bot Populi*

²³ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/9/18/20870938/break-up-big-tech-google-facebook-amazon-poll>

²⁴ <https://dawnnet.org/publication/gender-blindness-and-the-annulment-of-the-development-contract/>

²⁵ <https://www.asso-sherpa.org/open-letter-corporate-capture-of-global-governance-the-world-economic-forum-partnership-agreement-is-a-dangerous-threat-to-system>

respect for the natural world.²⁶ Feminists have used sousveillance (digital surveillance from below) in LGBTQI communities to create crowds-sourced maps of violence against queer people.²⁷

4. A new manifesto for feminism in digital times

Data governmentality is a planetary system of both social and economic reorganisation. Dominant strands of feminist digital activism have, however, tended to narrowly focus on the anti-libertarian excesses of dataveillance. The fight to preserve women's civic-political liberties and the struggle to challenge the economic injustice of digital capitalism are but two sides of the same coin.²⁸

In our efforts to mobilise, organise and collectivise for women's digital rights, therefore, we have to be cognisant that identitarian politics exclusively focused on the articulation of gender difference cannot get us very far. Under digital capitalism, the class-gender contradiction needs to be understood and unpacked.²⁹ There is a tendency in some quarters to claim that many of the social movements of the present day – LGBTQI struggles, environmental activism etc. – are post-material in character and have nothing to do with capitalism. This is a deeply flawed reading.

Movement-building strategies have tended to, in large part, be critical of representative structures and institutional politics, embracing voluntarism, spontaneity, and grassroots consensus-based decision-making and prefigurative politics.³⁰ These new social movements are “powerfully shaped by capitalism in a number of distinct ways”. For instance, many commentators have spoken about how even within the queer movement, class distinctions operate.³¹

Paying attention to the intertwining of symbolic and material structures of violence in the digital paradigm, and recognising that a hyper-quantified human society has devastating consequences for radical transformation, a cyborgian feminist manifesto must be reimagined. The elements of such a manifesto need to be attentive to the following considerations:

a. A global governance framework for data: Given that data may be seen as an extension of the self, the end product of affective labour, a productive resource or the wealth of a community, a simplistic solution for data governance will not work. Also, as argued, there is a prior question to contend with about the

²⁶https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261716803_Solutions_to_the_crisis_The_Green_New_Deal_Degrowth_and_the_Solidarity_Economy_Alternatives_to_the_capitalist_growth_economy_from_an_ecofeminist_economics_perspective

²⁷<https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/big-data-and-sexual-surveillance> . Pp 15

²⁸https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324151301_%27A_history_of_feminist_engagement_with_development_and_digital_technologies%27_Bengaluru_IT_for_Change

²⁹<https://medium.com/@alysonescalante/on-women-as-a-class-materialist-feminism-and-mass-struggle-42a228bde888>

³⁰<https://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/1008/1217>

³¹<https://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/1008/1217>

limits of datafication and the no-go zones where data markets may not be allowed to operate under any circumstance. The only satisfactory way by which this issue can be addressed is to put in place a binding international human rights framework for data and AI, and ending the soft-peddling of this issue through the myriad AI ethics discussions. Concrete instantiations of this would be answering through the democratic process questions such as, ‘Should menstrual data mining be allowed?’; ‘Should geographic targeting of anti-abortion propaganda be allowed?’; and so on. Societies need to reclaim the collective will to deliberate upon the space of flows, introjecting into it a feminist ethics and norms that can reshape power.

Economic development and gender equity cannot be unhinged. Therefore, data governance frameworks need to pay particular attention to development as a localised and embedded endeavor. An international agreement can recognise and validate the territorial sovereignty of nation-states to govern the data of their citizens/the data generated in their territories, and take necessary local action for women’s empowerment. This is an integral part of the state’s right and duty of development to their women citizenry. However, state interventionism for a people and planet centred feminist society of the future cannot become a way to further the rapacious data extractivism by corporations or incursions on women’s rights through authoritarian state control. New institutional thinking is needed to govern national data pools and the intelligence commons. The new economy hurtling in the direction of automation, smartification and platformisation needs to be reined in, with the political correction necessary for gender equality. Data governance policies are an important arena for feminist scholarship and action.

b. Platform responsibility towards women’s human rights: To ensure free speech and freedom from violence for women in the digitally-mediated public sphere, it is time to shift from ideas of ‘intermediary liability’ to a new discourse on platform responsibility. The corporations controlling the discourse today need to be held accountable for their ‘duty of care’ to their users. One important part of this task is to ensure that in content oversight and AI ethics boards of Big Tech companies, women’s human rights are not seen as an optional value to be customised or tweaked on an episodic basis, but as a non-negotiable bottom line.

c. A new social contract as if women matter: The digital economy requires that the state can regulate transnational digital capital, redraw the social contract to protect women workers and provide the care infrastructure that is integral to closing gender gaps in the labour market. The gig economy needs new policies and certification schemes to hold corporations accountable.³² Reform to taxation laws, so as to account for the substantive economic presence of technology companies, is also an urgent need to raise resources for public programs. New laws are necessary to regulate unconscionable market practices – such as the holding of nude images of female borrowers as collateral for loans in transactions on fintech platforms, or the rampant sharing of credit histories by banks with fintech companies, in violation of privacy. The provisioning of digital public goods – platform cooperatives for women’s organisations, data commons and AI for women’s empowerment – is an important measure to provide the impetus for

³²https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315321461_Digital_labour_and_development_impacts_of_global_digital_labour_platforms_and_the_gig_economy_on_worker_livelihoods

women's participation in the digital society and economy.³³ Social and Solidarity Economy platform models are urgently needed to reclaim a feminist economics for the digital age.

d. From liberalism to real choice: A feminist vision for the digital age must tackle head-on the particular paths of dependency that hegemonic intelligence capital foists on marginalised women in the Global South, taking away their agency and autonomy.³⁴ The good fight includes decoding and recoding ideas of democracy and redesigning the socio-political institutions of the state, so that they are adequate to the task of effecting feminist transformation. Being present in the global spaces where the new rules of the digital world order are getting set – from trade to human rights and the future of work – is a non-negotiable.

Capitalism's new frontiers of intelligencification are but a manifestation of its intrinsic greed. However, the gender regimes of this new stage require high reflexivity on the part of feminism – to recognise, know and act upon its inherent contradictions. Often, the benevolence of digital behemoths seems to distract feminists from the bold thinking necessary to call out and reject their desperately extractivist ambitions. But this is an urgent necessity.

Influential global policy documents (of the World Bank and UNCTAD) assert that 'the South is rising'. The rise of Chinese digital power on the global economic stage cannot be conflated with the rise of the South or its women. The epochal transition into the digital economy and society perpetuates the injustices that the most marginalised women in Asia, Africa and Latin America have resisted. The South as metaphor does still hold enormous power for feminism.

³³<https://www.sef-bonn.org/en/publications/global-governance-spotlight/42019.html>

³⁴<https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/1664/The-Wicked-Problem-of-AI-Governance.pdf>